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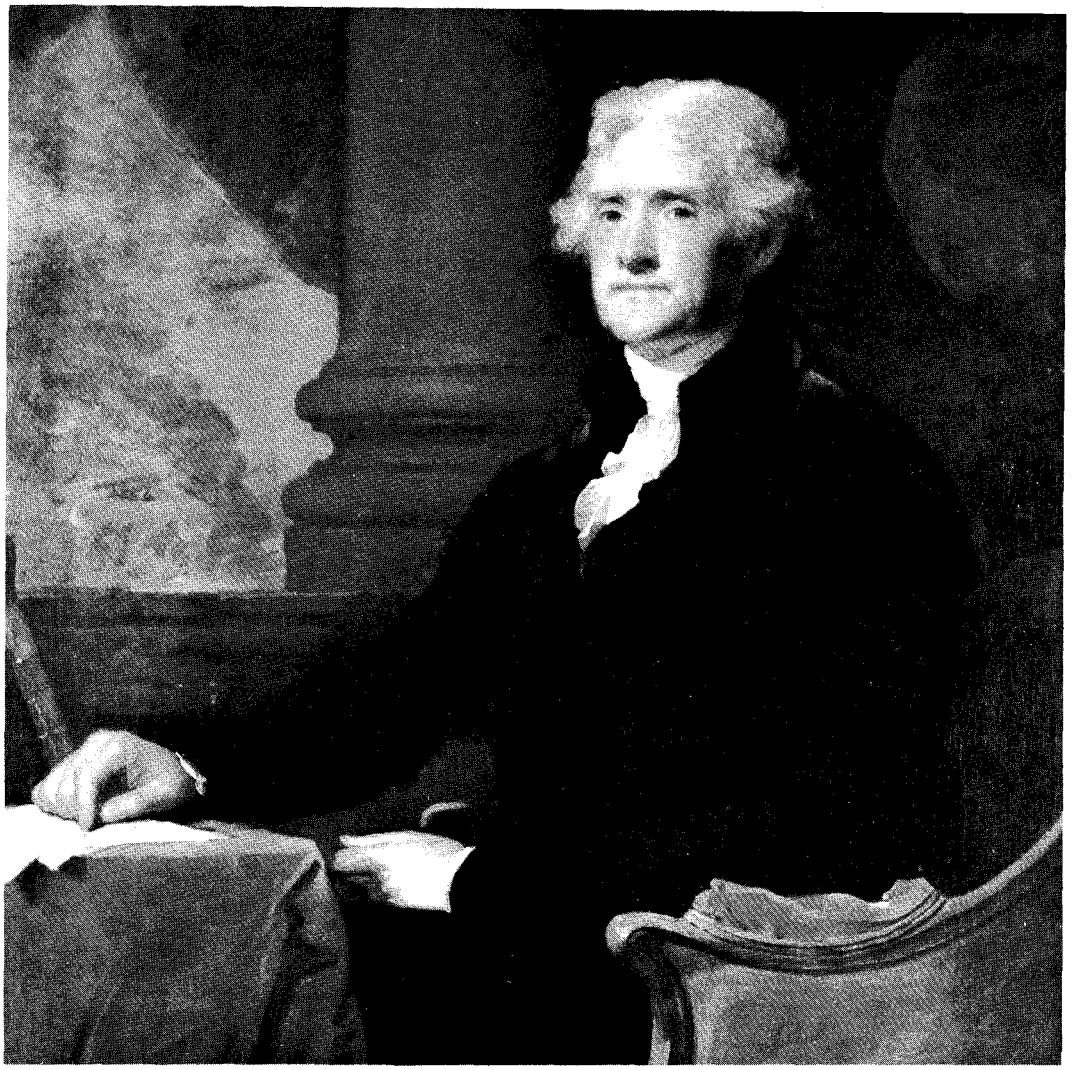

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RATES:

$2.50 a copy; $9.00 a year in the U.S. and its possessions, $10.00 in Canada and Latin America; all others $11.00.

COVER:
"Night Prowler," by Marvin Cone (Oil on canvas, 30 × 36 inches, Collection of Winnifred Cone)
Photographed by Bill Witt

ILLUSTRATIONS: Christel-Anthony Tucholke (20, 26), Shirley Pasternak (31), Susan Miles (35-40), Grant Garinger (41), Judy Volkman (44), Donna Evans, Cor Hoekstra

★ THE NORTH AMERICAN ★

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THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW [ISSN 0029-2397], December 1981, Vol. 266, No. 4. Published quarterly, in March, June, September, December by the University of Northern Iowa, 1222 West 27th Street, Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614. Annual subscription rates: $9.00 in the United States and its possessions, $10.00 in Canada and Latin America, $11.00 in all other countries. Second class postage paid at Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614.

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POSTMASTER: Send change of address to *The North American Review*, University of Northern Iowa, 1222 West 27th Street, Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614. THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW is indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, the Humanities Index, Index to Little Magazines, Index of American Periodical Verse, the Book Review Index, and others. Member of the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines (CCLM) and the Committee of Small Magazine Editors and Publishers (COSMEP). Article reprints and back file volumes in microform are available from University Microfilms International, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106 or 18 Bedford Row, London WC1R 4EJ. United States and Canadian newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 111 Eighth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10011.

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A Writers' Congress:

1. Whereas. . .

Question: Can America's "writers" (more as I proceed about who these seem to be) embody or bring into meaningful and unified focus a liberal political force that is effective, durable, humane, and wise? Can American writers form a National Writers' Union—and should they? I don't know, or at least for the moment I'll hedge my bet.

I speak, of course, of The American Writers (spelled consistently without the apostrophe) Congress, organized by The Nation Institute, an offshoot, as I understand it, of *The Nation* magazine, and convened over the weekend of October 9-12 at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City. The Congress has been deemed by some to have been at least partially a success, but it has left me a little more than half sympathetic, and depressingly doubtful about the state of the intellectual-political life in America.

Let me skip some of the details—the milling crowds in the hallways and Grand Ballroom on opening night, when, indeed, a certain excitement seemed to be in the air; the much acclaimed keynote speeches by Meridel LeSueur and Toni Morrison; the attendance (I've read) of 4,000 people against an anticipated 2,000; the six-deep phalanxes pressing to get at the bar; the green nametags printed in type too small to be of much use to any except those with telescopic vision—and offer a couple of anecdotes that may suggest more about the heart of the thing.

On Saturday around noon, I went to a panel entitled "Language as Ideology," one of the ten workshops or panels being held at that same time in various rooms of the hotel. Ten minutes early, I found all the seats filled (as usual), and so I squeezed in with a number of other people against the back wall, next to one of the klieg lights set there by the videotape crew (the whole of the Congress was recorded in one way or another, on sound tape, video tape, or film). As things were moving toward a start, a young woman in black leather pants approached me, seeking signatures for a resolution she hoped to have presented to the plenary session for adoption at the end of the Congress (fifty signatures were required for presentation of resolutions). My anecdote is simply this: the woman grew intensely, haughtily angry at me when I explained why I thought it unreasonable for me to sign. Her resolution asked that, in the case of paperback sales, a contract be placed in effect "by which the hardback publisher binds her/himself to insure that the purchaser of paperback rights contribute a percentage of the purchase price to a fund, to be administered by the Writers Congress with the aim to either establishing the Writers Congress as a permanent organization with lobbying powers, or setting up an independent noncommercial publishing house, or both." It seemed to me—aside from a number of other problems with it—that the resolution was inadequately thought out and that, quixotically, it amounted to a requirement that *management* (in this case the hardback publisher) pay *union* dues out of its earnings. Labor pays union dues, I suggested; management, if forced, pays fringe benefits and of course salaries, but why would it agree (or be forced by the courts to agree) to pay union dues directly out of its earnings? The young woman, turning on her heel after a hostile and suspicious scrutiny of my nametag, tossed back at me: "Well, then they don't have to buy the book at all if they don't want to."

My second anecdote has also to do with a resolution being circulated for signatures. This one was passed hand to hand among the same panel audience; by the time it reached me at the back of the room, the sheet was thick with a darkness of signatures, room for more only on its vertical margins. I watched it coming along the row of standees. People read it and signed it. When it came to me, I read it and began as quickly as I could to copy it into my notebook. Since I was standing up, this was a somewhat awkward task, and the girl standing next to me, who had herself just signed it, watched me for a minute or two with a curious interest, and then asked, kindly, "Would you like me to hold it for you while you copy?"

Remember, this happened in "Language as Ideology." Now note what so many of the people in the room had just signed:

The resolution was in three parts, two "whereas" parts and a "therefore" part. The first "whereas" alluded to the recent Columbia University study of writers' incomes from their work, cited the study's findings that the average American writer earns less than $5,000 a year from writing books, then declared that "concern with mere survival *in every case* fetters the freest expression of ideas" (the resolution's italics, not mine). The second "whereas" said this: "When controlled by power, language always designates something other than lived experience. Power lives on stolen goods, creating nothing, recuperating everything." And the "therefore": The American Writers Congress "endorses the struggle for writers' fullest participation in the wealth created by them."

I suppose—I hope—that people were signing the paper for the sake of the "therefore" part (who wouldn't agree with that?), and that they were (however unwisely) more or less ignoring the "whereas" parts. But talk about language as ideology! I suspect that the fact of American writers earning less than $5,000 a year from writing books hardly means that they are concerned in any great numbers, if at all, "with mere survival": I know an awful lot of less-than-$5,000-a-year writers with annual (I won't say whether this in itself is a good thing or a bad thing) teaching salaries of five times that amount. And does, for that matter, "concern with mere survival in every case [fetter] the freest expression of ideas"? Aside from the question of what's meant by "mere survival," isn't this a peculiar thing to hear at a time when the literature of minorities, of the tyrannized, the oppressed and imprisoned (does anybody remember *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*?) is such a presumably major and valued part of our literary consciousness, for its bespeaking of humane truth and of moral authenticity? What, furthermore, is meant here by 'power'? Exactly when *is* language controlled by power, and when is it not? What power is being talked about—the writer's? someone

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else's? the Pentagon's? capitalism's? the Soviet Union's? Is the resolution trying to talk about censorship, or is it trying to talk about language (and of what use is a powerless language?)? For that matter, did Solzhenitsyn *not* write about "lived experience"? If he didn't, I must say I'm happy to be among the first to know. In the issue of *The Nation* (October 3, 1981) devoted to "The Writer's State" and intended to accompany the opening of the Congress, Barbara Grizzuti Harrison wrote this: "When I finally learned to tell the truth, I was driven—to write. Naturally I prefer to think of writers as people who need to tell the truth because their sanity depends upon it." The resolution that I copied down while I stood in the back of the room simply doesn't, I think, tell the truth. It distorts, manipulates (however idealistically), and puffs itself up with soggy half-thoughts and unexamined ideas in order to gain its own ends. Was it, then—according at least to the terms of Barbara Grizzuti Harrison's bull's-eye definition—written by a writer, or was it not? And how many of the writers sitting in that crowded room in the Roosevelt Hotel, devoted to a discussion of "Language as Ideology," thought it appropriate to feel a faint tremor of irony or a passing twinge of writer's conscience at the putting of their pens to the signing of such a document, virtually foundering under its own burden of leaky ideology, however well intended?

Impressions: responses to two moments that occurred in one room during one panel on one day during a congress that lasted more than two full days and during those days included over fifty other panels, workshops, readings, keynote addresses, parties, roundtable discussions, caucuses, and union-planning sessions. I didn't see or hear anything approaching the whole Congress; I dare say nobody did, except maybe, taken together, all those omnipresent cameras and tape recorders. But even though I didn't see the whole thing, what I did see seems to me to have had a lot in common with the kind of experience I came upon in "Language as Ideology."

* * *

The Congress, as it turned out, wasn't a place to go to feel around you the presence or excitement of a gathered intellectual energy of much substance or poise. Nor was it a place to go to gain a new, or more useful, meaningful, substantial, or poignant idea of what it means to *be* a writer (as opposed to agitating *as* a writer) in a politically failing, late capitalist America. The sounds I heard were responses, not ideas. I had hoped—my hopes had been raised quite high—to be part of a congress of American literary intellectuals; I had hoped, also, to be witness to that moment (that two-day-long moment, if you will) when those intellectuals worked to formulate and express a politics that would prove to be strong and significant—also new, I dare say—by its knitting together of political power with the perceptive intelligence of the committed and working intellectual. Too much to have asked, perhaps, in my own naiveté; in that sense the failure, if it was one, may be only of my own making. But the gloom I was left with by the end of the Congress was the gloom of seeing the Congress fail substantially to create or evoke what I had hoped for: an intellectual politics. The Congress indeed gave expression to a politics, but by and large to the wearied and deeply familiar politics salvaged in essentially unaltered form from the leftism and social liberalism of the 1960s. No harm there, except for the traces of exhaustion. For the rest—and, to my mind, a more serious matter; it was, after all, a *writers'* congress—the Congress failed quite utterly to create, or even address itself to, a political *aesthetic*.

It was in important ways a disappointing congress for a writer. A person, writer or not, could vote with good conscience in favor of many of the resolutions brought before the plenary session: resolutions on First Amendment rights, on libel ("The American Writers Congress resolves that book and magazine publishers be required to defend the written word in the event of legal action brought against it, the legal costs to be borne by the publishers"), on "Lesbian and Gay Rights," on Minority Rights, on imprisoned writers in culturally oppressive nations and those writing under repressive régimes. Other resolutions, though, brought me a sense of gloom and despair, particularly those that failed most visibly in their attempts to make some meaningful connection between writing itself and politics. The "Resolution on a Multiracial and Multicultural America" is an example, brought by the fossilized burden of its pluralistic liberal inheritance to a form of Newspeak itself. "The American Writers Congress," it declares, "recognizes that the American writer is a multiracial and multinational aggregate and that America embraces a geographic boundary that extends hemispherically, and that all Congress bodies must reflect this reality as well as all genres of writing, from children's books to specialized fields." Its own bad writing aside (can America "embrace" its boundary?), the resolution's claim that the American writer is an "aggregate" throws me into despond, and I vote nay. Even at the risk of sounding naive, I would argue strenuously that the *unique* political value of writing, today as throughout history, lies in the act itself: in the effort to give voice to individual conscience through words, and in the act of causing those words to reveal truth—not falsehoods, platitudes, old saws, deceptions, lies, or shams, but truth—against any and all obstacles, threats, barriers, or odds whatsoever, great or small. And this act of writing is done, today just as it has been throughout history, not by an aggregate (aggregates do *their* verbal work on Madison Avenue and in the Pentagon), but by individual, thinking, conscience-driven human beings within the body politic who clearly understand the unaccountable value, delicacy, and power of language: the revealing of the truth "because their sanity depends upon it." It's true enough that writers can unionize as they continue this work. It's true also that if they do unionize, they will do so, just like subway conductors and hotel porters, for certain concrete ends (the *right* to continue their work, for example), and those ends should of course be equitable, fair, wise, and humane. All of this is fine and good, but only so long as one distinction remains absolutely clear. As union members, writers can be an aggregate. As *writers*, they cannot be and must not be, if only because their single *unique* political value will be lost. If this distinction cannot be maintained—and the Congress gave me little confidence that it could—the idea of a union should be dropped.

The sense of cultural and political emergency at the Congress was, especially at moments, great. Ring Lardner, Jr., delivered a keynote address in which he denounced with eloquence and passion the "anti-human, anti-rational, and anti-sur-

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vival" direction of the nation, of Reaganism, and of the national mood, concluding that we are faced with the task of preventing nothing less than "the death of this society." With issues as extreme as these—and I don't for a moment doubt that they are so—it may seem niggardly and precious of me to be concerned about such matters as a "political aesthetic" or the unique, precise value, in a political context, of the act of writing itself. But I was looking, in the Congress, for the understanding and declaration of a significant union between writing and politics, and I didn't find it. Instead, politics were fervently and openly addressed—if not always wisely—while the subject of writing itself came increasingly to be left behind like a poor relation, almost as if, in some alarming and deeply unsettling way, it were a matter of secondary interest. Insofar as this separation between act and word really happened, it suggests a serious intellectual failure that I know has plenty of historical precedent and that I suspect goes well beyond the walls of the meeting rooms of the Congress.

* * *

A panel that drew my eye from the start was a Sunday morning meeting entitled "Writers at Ground Zero." The printed program for the weekend cited the questions the panel was to take up, and as I read those questions it seemed to me that in this panel, if anywhere, given the most pressing and absolute of all contemporary political questions as the discussion material, a genuine relatedness between the aesthetics of writing and the actions of politics would almost necessarily be enunciated: "The most recent Gallup Poll reports that 7 out of 10 Americans believe there is a real chance of a nuclear war involving our country sometime in the next decade, yet most American writers have ignored this question in their work. Is there a new moral imperative for the writer in the thermonuclear age? Will future generations accuse us of crimes of silence? How can writers meaningfully confront the Doomsday issue and the question of disarmament in their own work, especially in the popular media?"

But I was wrong. The relation wasn't made, and for that matter the people in the room seemed incapable of making it, or even of conceiving it. At the start of the panel, Antar Mberi, the moderator and organizer, brought very bad news indeed. The panel, he said, had originally been entitled not "Writers at Ground Zero," but "Writers in the Quest for Peace"; he was, at this moment, officially returning to the original title, this being, as he put it, a "more constructive" wording. What he was really saying, of course, was this: We are here not to talk about writing, or about writing as a unique *part* of politics, but we are here to talk about politics: in his phrases, "Peace, racial justice, sexual equality, social justice." Mberi, in short, no political aesthetician, was implying that it didn't really matter whether we were all writers or not; we happened to be gathered here under that aegis, but in fact we were a group of concerned citizens of the world, committed to the saving of our planet. And yes, indeed, we were. But as far as our vocations were concerned—we could have been anybody.

From this point on, the panel was interesting and, for a writer, depressing. Ted Solotaroff, as first panelist to speak, delivered the only intellectually sustained comments on the unique relatedness of writing and politics that I heard during the entire Congress. And he was ignored. Writers, he began, have traditionally influenced either the language of their age or the imagination of their age; the truth now, however, is that "writing has had very little effect on the culture of our time." As far as the threat of nuclear holocaust is concerned, R.D. Laing's idea is meaningful: that in order to destroy the planet, we must first drive ourselves crazy. All around us, Solotaroff suggested, we see the increasing forces of such insanity.

What does this have to do with writing? Everything. Writers, said Solotaroff, have lost control of our language; the *language* of atomic war remains in the possession of the nuclear warriors—"overkill," "deterrence," "clean weapons," "window of vulnerability"—and "this is the language that controls public thinking about nuclear war." Control of language, in other words, is tantamount to control of imagination. In previous eras, writers "pretty much controlled" the language, but this is no longer so, and one result is that an insane idea—the idea of nuclear war—is "cleansed," made hygienic, and therefore made all the more likely to occur. The falsely "realistic" and "technical" vocabulary of so-called nuclear diplomacy, of the military, and of government serves to "separate reality and imagination" and "separates the self from the 'other,' " with the result that the threat of destruction seems to be "there," not *here*, not in our own control. Our culture has become the "deformed culture" that E.P. Thompson speaks of as occurring through a corruption of language; we have become passive, controlled by the threat of an insane abstraction that no longer sounds insane, and the idea of madness as something acceptable or inevitable "gets into the bones of our imagination." What is the utterly indispensable political calling of the writer, as distinct from that of the follower of any other vocation? It is to protect, reclaim, to *save* language, the most powerful and necessary—and, when not perverted or debased, the most noble—of all political and humane weapons. This—in my words, not Solotaroff's—is very likely the most highly called-for of the *writer's* radical acts.

But that radical act seemed in general to be of little interest to those gathered at the Congress. I hope I'm entirely wrong—about this as about other aspects of the intellectual sogginess and intellectual segmentation of the Congress. I do know that in "The Writer at Ground Zero," Solotaroff's plea did not strike so much as a single chord, did not become a rallying point in any way whatsoever. It simply wasn't of interest to those assembled. Grace Paley, at one time a writer, called for "action," by which she meant a "gathering together," a program of rallies. "You have to become missionaries" (not "you have to become writers"), she told her audience—with the same passion and conviction, I assume, as she would say it to an audience of concerned plumbers, teachers, or trumpet players: you have to "organize, and write letters, and communicate with each other." John Oliver Killens concluded that we must "demonstrate for peace and freedom," that we must "mobilize." And, from the floor,

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Judith Rossner insisted, with a rhetoric from the past and a remarkable disregard for the fearsome metaphors of passivity, mindlessness, and death hidden within her words, that "We've got to get our bodies into the streets."

If this is what the long tradition of Writing in America has come to—surfaces, a too frequently muddled or thinned-out desperation, a throwing of bodies into the streets—then I doubt that any number of gatherings, huddlings, unions will do much good—at least not for the dignity or real power of writing or of intellectual politics in the nation. The needs go deep; judging by the Congress, or by my own experience of it, the raw materials themselves need work, much of it, and soon. I continue to hope that I am entirely mistaken: that I chose badly and went to the wrong panels, that I listened to the wrong people in the hallways, or even that I will wake up suddenly and discover that I was in the wrong place, at the wrong hotel, at the wrong Congress.

–Eric Larsen

. . . and 2. Therefore

What the several thousand writers wedged inside the Grand Ballroom of the Roosevelt Hotel didn't know was that outside, barred by a "human chain" of Congress staffers, were hundreds of other writers, latecomers but each eager to hear the keynote addresses by activist Meridel LeSuer and editor-novelist Toni Morrison; like us, these outsiders were breathless to hear of the "crisis" in writing—a crisis signaled by the country's slump to the political right, by renewed efforts to ban and burn books, by the further conglomeratization of the book industry itself, by the lurch toward commercialism as the standard of quality, by cutbacks in government support of the arts, and by the "feeling" that writing, as *Nation* editor Victor Navasky announced, was yet another endangered species and that writers were the dodos and the sloths of the Eighties. Writers, we insiders were learning, were victims—of Big Brother politics they couldn't or wouldn't understand; of supply-side economic policies they were powerless to thwart; of a pop-slop culture, alas, that insisted on co-opting or trivializing or debasing its literature.

Organized by the Nation Institute, a nonprofit group associated with *The Nation*, and modeled on the Writers Congresses of the 1930s, which were a "reaction to the Depression at home and fascism abroad," this American Writers Congress sought, through panels and workshops and roundtables and "hearings" and caucuses and plenary sessions, to address a hodge-podge of issues—from the nuts-and-bolts of contracts and subsidiary rights to the loftiness of the roles of writers and writing itself. We were there, we were told, for more than the "private interest" of individuals. We were there, as the program notes, because of a "vital public interest in the character, quality and critical spirit of our literary culture."

Such "interest," however, was often difficult to find, for among the writers and on the panels (even those with such MLA-inspired titles as "Language as Ideology") were many with axes to grind and callings to serve—from the Latino-Hispano-Gayo to Nativo-Feminino-Vegetarians. There were those well-hyphenated: proto-Mayan revivalists, gut-shot neo-colonialists, soft- and hard-core porn-pushers, the Liberated and the Libertine; there were those, like Ishmael Reed, arguing in behalf of the true American culture, creolism; there were those who slung dung on an Establishment run by what were described as accountants, megolomaniacs, Philistines and the "borderline Jewish"; and there were those, hack and aesthete alike, who called for demonstrations, for marches, for fighting the fires of re- and sup-pression with the equally hot fires of righteousness.

It got funny ha-ha . . . and funny weird. Ipso-dipso writers, eyeballs gleaming with fury, scurried from the Madison Room ("An Evening of Solidarity with Silenced Korean Writers") to the Park Suite ("The Chicago Tradition of Proletarian Writing") to the Broadway Suite ("Droit Morale: Writers and Creative Control"), muttering about trenches and ramparts and vanguards, about fending off the goom-bahs and Visigoths and the, uh, filthy money-lenders in the You-Know-Where.

Everywhere the talk was the same: Woe, Despair, Monopolies, "Oligopoly in the Idea Market," kulchur, threat and response, the ding-dong of doom. And everywhere were the questions—those bile-nursed, fat, self-important, night-fighter, cutting-edge, avant-etcetera questions: "Do our metaphors reflect an impulse to liberate or colonize?" "What is the relationship of American writers to imperialism?" "Are there prejudices or stumbling blocks put in the path of working-class writers?" Yup, Bunky, this was war!

By late Sunday, the third day of this pow-wow, many—especially the cynical, those without the privilege of deprivation—were sick unto lunacy with this war-dance of breast-beating and finger-pointing. "Jesus," one writer said, "would you trust any of these people with the bomb?" He was exhausted, in part by "Resolutions"—in support of Air Traffic Controllers, the Socialist Worker's Party, Iranian and Imprisoned and South African and El Salvadoran writers, Jacobo Timmerman and, yes, Peace. About the only issues unresolved were what to do about the whale, the seal and the Big Bad Wolf.

And more than one writer, offended by the stink of too much holier-than-thou leftist hipsterism and confused by a nuke-the-Bastille approach to art, strangled his conscience to take a trip to the Yankees-Brewers playoffs, there to vie for foul balls with bozo, bohemian, Brahmin, bully, bum and big-shot. At the stadium, one writer allowed, there wasn't anything Jim Crow or militaristic or imperialistic in a seeing-eye ground ball up the middle.

So, by early Monday morning, when some writers were making for their digs or cubbies, others were leaving secure in the belief that they'd struck a cliché against the bad guys, and even those who had milled outside on opening night could still hear the call to arms; for what they'd missed was the chance to join Ms. Morrison in a call for "sovereignty," a chance to add their voices to hers when she spoke, in a tone full of brimstone and smoking holes and in a language top-heavy with cant and politic and dialectic, less about the state of the art than about the art of the state. Yes, my brothers and sisters, a good time was had by all.

—Lee K. Abbott

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Club Crawling through England & Wales

"It's like, well, you know, a 'safe house,' my club is. Like what the Intelligence Services operated in the war. A place you can go to where the enemy–and even your friends who have no business there–can't get to you. A safe house."

Steel Town

It is Saturday night in Sheffield—Britain's Pittsburgh. In the cold moonlight, the city centre looks deserted, almost derelict. Whole neighborhoods of this South Yorkshire steel town look as if an enemy airforce had just dropped its bombs squarely on them. Empty pitted wastelands and half-demolished buildings, leaking rubble, belie Sheffield's relative prosperity. For miles around, people have locked themselves up for the night inside high-rise housing projects, known as council flats, which ring the once beautiful city like sinister megaliths. A vast privacy, silent and nervous, seems to descend on England's sixth largest city.

But inside Dial House, a working men's club on the outskirts of Sheffield, we are having a lovely time. It's ten p.m., a long hour before closing time. The stadium-size main concert hall is packed to the walls, maybe a thousand men with wives or girl friends. Teenagers, couples in middle life and old age pensioners mingle easily and un-self-consciously. The noise is terrific as their laughter and chatter compete with a squallingly bad sound system plugged into the stage, where a live rock band is struggling for attention. There are no waiters, and people are constantly on their feet, fetching beer from a bar at the back, shouting to their friends. But most are conservatively dressed, in suits and ties. Even among the younger members, there are few jeans or t-shirts. And women of all ages are dressed up to the nines; after all, they are here on sufferance, for a night out.

My hosts for the evening are joining in, but with a slightly forced joviality. Colin and Barry, who, with their wives, have been taking me on a club crawl, are steel workers, and the country is in the eleventh week of a paralyzing strike. Colin is the problem. He is not exactly a pariah in his own club, but he is not popular either. He is a shop steward at Hadfields, a privately owned steel company which has just settled with the union. Many of his friends, including Barry, are still on strike. Already tonight, Colin has been called *scab* to his face, with an unhappy Barry, a friend since childhood, refusing to say a word for him. As most of the crowd goes into stitches over the well-worn jokes of a local comedian, my friends sit in dour silence, punctuated by the occasional provocative remark from one or the other of their wives, Angela and Maureen, who seem determined to express their contempt for strikes, strikers, and indeed men in general. Eventually the two wives join in a game of bingo which, with a cry of "Heads down!", starts up from the stage. We men are left to our political blues. And to the beer, warm, heavy and cheap (at 30 pence a pint, Europe's best buy). "Aye, that's the way it is—will ye have one more?" Colin or Barry has asked a dozen times tonight. And for that brief moment the rift is healed, by the alchemist's gold of Guinness or Whitbreads Mild or Stone's Bitter.

In an access of mildly alcoholic sentimentality they all decide to take me back to Attercliffe, the old neighborhood where they grew up. It's a mad dash across the city in freezing fog; clubs, hugely conformist to the law of the land, firmly keep to pub closing hours at eleven p.m. But as we come closer to Attercliffe, Colin, at the wheel of his Cortina, keeps making one mistaken turn after

"A Way of Life like No Other"

This article is an account of a trip I took through the working-class "clubland" of England and Wales in the Spring of 1980. Between that time and now we in Britain seem to have crossed a sharp divide. Eighteen months ago I could call it a "recession" instead of what it has become: a raging full-scale depression. Officially there are three million unemployed in Britain, probably more. The pain is spread unfairly, with the northern and Welsh industrial areas taking the main shock–as always. Northumbria now has one in six without work; the steel town of Consett has been more or less wiped out. (The steel strike I mention was settled by bargaining away jobs for more wages; and 'The Ripper' finally was caught, in the red-light district of Sheffield, not far from one of the clubs I describe. He turned out to be not the Newcastle factory-hand the police told us they were looking for, but a Bradford lorry driver.)

Predictably, a native fascist movement grows–and is directly or indirectly responsible for a plague of beatings, arson and murders of blacks and browns. At football games, organized racists openly pass out Nazi propaganda to youths who face becoming permanently jobless even before they've had their first jobs. This summer riots in Liverpool, Manchester and Brixton shook an Establishment whose tired response is to stiffen police powers. CS gas was used for the first time on mainland Britain during the Liverpool fracas, and the Manchester police have just purchased some hyper-performing machine guns from Germany.

England teeters on the brink of no one knows what. I am sure of almost nothing except that the clubmen of Tyneside, Lancashire, Yorkshire and the Rhondda valleys will be among the last to lose their nerve. *Autumn 1981*

Text by Clancy Sigal

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Sheffield's "Golden Mile," where several clubs are located.

another. Angela, in the back seat, is intensely irritated, but challenged, she's as disoriented as the rest of us on these mean streets without lamp-posts, with hardly any houses.

It's sheer luck we finally arrive at Colin's first club; his father inducted him into it on his eighteenth birthday. Attercliffe Radical Working Men's Club looms up in the dark, isolated in acres of bulldozed wasteland. It's the still-living heart of a ghost town. I used to come here, on my way to the Penistone coal pits. Once it was surrounded by bustling back-to-back terraces where no one locked his door at night and everyone minded his neighbor's business. Now there's a gypsy encampment pitched next door. "Were you mugged on your way in?" the club secretary asks, only half joking. Yet the club, small and shabby compared to Dial House which is twenty times its size, is crammed with former Attercliffe residents. They've been "re-housed," sometimes two or three bus rides away. But disregarding inconvenience, and in spite of the new clubs built on modern estates, they keep coming back. In fact, the Attercliffe-that-is-no-more somehow, miraculously, sustains four busy clubs which hang on against all the sociological odds.

Where Dial was loud and brassy, Attercliffe is cozy, rather domestic. In spite of the obligatory organist and drummer, here backing up a local brother and sister belting out Abba hits, it all feels like somebody's back yard. There are even small children, munching potato chips and spilling sticky orange fizz, playing underfoot. (Although the legal drinking age is eighteen, the law is interpreted more tolerantly in clubs, which encourage whole families, than in pubs. A couple of ten year olds are having quite a night of it sipping the dregs of beer glasses.) And nobody here, in Colin's home club, calls him a scab.

Colin, Barry and I manage to fight off a couple of other members and take possession of an antique snooker table. Angela and Maureen sip shandies and pretend not to envy us. Women are admitted only as "associate" or half members to working men's clubs, and they're never allowed near the sacred green baize of the snooker tables. Pool has become a feminist battleground. Further up north a miner's wife, Mrs. Capstick, is suing Wakefield City W.M.C. under the Equal Rights Act because she was banned from playing snooker with her husband. "A daft publicity seeker if you ask me," announces Angela, who'd rather die than sound like a 'women's libber'. Both she and Maureen—they've been going to clubs since they were children but never on their own, always with fathers or brothers, now with husbands—badmouth the 200 women who recently picketed a club convention demanding an end to sex discrimination. Yet both wives harbor deeply ambiguous attitudes to their subordinate position. "Discrimination, is it?" sniffs Maureen. "Why, if my Barry died tomorrow morning I'm sure his club would let me in on my

Photographs by Mike Cohen

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own that evening." Barry looks sour. But she is probably right. It's a curious phenomenon I encounter all over England. Wives, often understandably jealous of clubs as a too-easy refuge from domestic obligations, may visit but are never really accepted in their own right. Yet widows often become active and respected "clubmen".

"Time, gentlemen!" The lights blink on and off in the traditional warning. One by one, slightly roisterous parties, including mothers with babies in their arms, gather themselves together and leave the Attercliffe Radical. Catcalls and laughter echo, as if noise alone can defeat the bleak and vacant night outside. Colin automatically inspects his Cortina to see if his tires are still there. "Gypsies," is all he says. More even than immigrant West Indians or "Pakis," the presence of wandering Romanies is commonly seen as the proof of irreversible urban decay.

As the car descends a winding roadway towards my hotel, back into the bowl of Sheffield, its yellow sodium lights flaring in the near distance, Angela suddenly bitchily remarks that it used to look beautiful at night before the furnaces were darkened by the strike. The two men, who have never, not once this evening, mentioned the cause of their estrangement, the steel strike, sit silent. Then in the back seat Barry, normally diffident despite his brawn, booms out: "It's that stupid woman causing all the mischief. Thatcher. Never happen if we had a man at the helm." He turns to me. "You know your Yank tele programme, Dallas? What we need is someone like J.R. to bang heads together at negotiating table." He leans forward and touches Colin's shoulder. Softly, almost apologetically, he says, "It'll end in compromise. Has to."

The next, hung-over morning, before catching my train, I follow up a suggestion Colin whispered to me as he dropped me at my hotel door last night. Sunday lunch is traditionally stripper time in many clubs. I have just enough time to catch "Miss Spectacular" at Walkley W.M.C., awkwardly gyrating to her own cassette. The Sight Of The Week is the front row of elderly Life Members, sternly, methodically, studying their newspapers in *their* accustomed seats in front of the stage, while cheers and whistles zing over their bowed heads from the young bucks at the rear of the hall. There are even a few women in the audience—a real break with tradition. Until fairly recently, some South Yorkshire clubs displayed prominent notices on Sunday lunchtime: PUDDING BURNERS NOT ALLOWED IN HERE. Translated, all wives should be home watching the Yorkshire pudding.

The middleaged West Indian taxi driver who delivers me to Central Station berates me all the way because the Americans have not invaded his native Jamaica to keep it from going Communist. How long has he lived in Sheffield, and does he belong to any working men's clubs? "Twenty-three years I live here, man. The only way they let me in clubs is pick up passengers. There's an all-Caribbean club over in Manchester I go to sometimes. Good enough for me. Got to be, right? When you Yanks going to parachute in and clean up my island so's I can go home, huh?"

* * *

Dotted all around Sheffield, in the centre that's been developed out of existence, in the respectable suburbs, in the working class estates and the hillside villages, there are 60 or 70 clubs. They have names like Sheffield Loco, Philadelphian, The Limes, Crookes, St. Philips Social and Brinsworth Ex-Servicemen's. And beyond the South Riding hills there are many more like them–nearly 4000 in all, with a membership of five million. They stretch from the South Midlands to the Scottish border, from Liverpool on the Atlantic to Hull on the North Sea; they flourish in the valleys of South Wales. Curiously, heavy-drinking Scotland has no real club tradition, and the recent extension of pub hours has finished off most of those there were.

Yet in England and Wales, club members are actually increasing. As with Attercliffe, some clubs have survived better than the communities that gave birth to them. They have proved their adaptability. Weekends are the big nights. But many clubs try to put on a different activity each evening–Monday disco to pull in the kids, Tuesday bingo for old age pensioners, boxing on Wednesday, a strip show on Thursday. As times get harder, as more and more traditional neighborhoods disintegrate, as men lose their jobs in steel or coal or shipbuilding, the clubs play a more important part in the lives of their members.

Mention English clubs and most of us think of London's elegant and gentlemanly St James, of Carltons and Whites and Boodles and Beefsteak. Today only a few of these survive. It's this other, unknown clubland that is booming. To tour the clubs is, willy nilly, to be faced with the realities of working life in England and Wales today. One of which is that, like the posh clubs, the working men's clubs–in which women are second-class citizens and blacks are barred–proclaim a certain exclusiveness, a fantasy that "We're in, they're out," directed at people vaguely defined as unclubbable.

Tyneside

HELP US CATCH THE RIPPER
DO YOU RECOGNIZE
THIS HANDWRITING?

The huge police poster, with its blown-up facsimile of a man's ballpoint scrawl, is the first thing to catch my eye as I get off the train at Newcastle Central. The poster is tacked to every gate in the station.

Newcastle is famous for several things. The great Tyne river and its port; a dialect, completely baffling to outsiders, called Geordie; and, lately, a sadistic murderer who has killed and mutilated twelve women since 1975. So far, despite a voice cassette and a mocking letter sent to the police, he remains at large.

My contact, a young booking agent for acts used by the Northumbrian clubs, is late, so I buy the green sports edition of the local paper, which headlines a riot by Newcastle United fans at St. James Park, the town's football stadium. They play rough up here: someone has thrown a petrol bomb into a group of rival West Ham supporters. Tom is slightly defensive when he arrives. "Don't get the wrong idea about us," he says mildly. "Up here football is war. Clubs is armistice."

Tom is out tonight to do business. And it's quite big business. A few years ago, he was, with his twin brother, part of a successful rock group: he knows the world of the club entertainer the hard way. His brother, who's still a club performer, makes about £50,000 a year; Tom, married and with kids, chose the more stable but still lucrative job as an agent. He handles some of the most highly-paid stars on the circuit—and they expect him to turn up to catch their acts. And Saturday night is also a good time to grease the wheels with the club committee poobahs, especially the concert sec-

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retaries who arrange the programs and hire artists. As far as entertainment—and therefore any club's power to pull in customers—is concerned, "concert secs" rule the roost, Tom says. "They're my bread and butter. And my biggest headache."

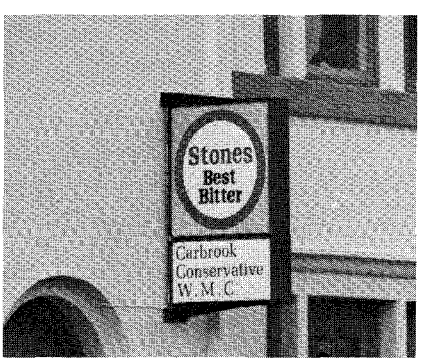
We start out at the top. Cramlington High Pit Social Club began as a tiny hut in a mining village not far from the hunger march town of Jarrow. The pit itself, along with dozens of others, was shut down in the Sixties, and the village back-to-backs have been replaced by strung-out modern villa-style houses. The Club, on the edge of a muddy field, doesn't look much from the outside. But it's one of the largest and most successful in England, and its members' pride and joy. We go into a palatial lobby that wouldn't be out of place in a Hilton hotel: mirrors, chrome, deep pile rugs.

Tom goes backstage to soothe one of his acts, a Birmingham song-and-dance man jittery at having to face a notoriously demanding Geordie audience. "Tyneside's known as the comics' graveyard," he explains, "for anyone born south of Newcastle." He leaves me in the hands of a couple of committee members. They aren't officially "on the door" this evening, but they're engaged in the favorite pastime of all real clubmen, hanging around casing the customers and generally making their presence felt. Once I've been vouched for by Tom, they are delighted to show me round and explain the workings. They want me to try out the red plush armchairs, to admire the cut-glass chandeliers, to inspect the sixty-place restaurant where you can dine by candlelight. Upstairs, in the luxurious committee room, there's a faded photograph of the club's founder members, miners in their Sunday best lined up outside the original building in the early 1900s. (New by comparison with Coventry W.M.C., which is 117 years old, but I'm too tactful to say it.) Nowadays, they boast, they book only the top acts; there is a bar staff of thirty, and people come from miles around just for the decor.

Yet all this was accomplished by barely educated working men in their spare time. Apart from one full-time steward and wife team in charge of the bar, the club is totally administered by elected volunteers, most of whom left school at 14. They include a lorry driver, factory hand, two retired miners and a middle-aged welder who's currently out of work. They do not take kindly to naive questions. "Hire professional help, did ye say?" An elderly committeeman, who has served since 1930, expresses real or mock surprise in a deliberately thick Geordie accent. "Ye mean accountants and sech like? Mon, use yir eyes. Tyneside is chockablock wi' them paper pushers and *luik* at the mess they've made. Committee—an' only committee—knows aboot clu'."

Committee—composed of 12 to 16 men—is the butt of many a northern comic's snide joke. Committee men have a reputation for being bluff and self-important; and sometimes just a little daft. (One club committee, in Barnsley, Yorkshire, is so obsessed with maintaining decorum that it has ruled out applause for acts. If patrons like an entertainer, they are supposed, silently, to raise one hand.) Committee men guard "their" doors with the zeal of the Home Guard in 1940 scanning the horizon for Hitler's armada. Some enjoy nothing so much as challenging any stranger unwise enough to try to penetrate the sacred precincts. Only the week before, one of Tom's top-line comics, late for his performance, was barred from a club—though a poster with his photograph was displayed by the door he wasn't allowed to enter.

Internal club politics are byzantine, a minefield of petty jealousies, ancient grudges and canny maneuvers and outmaneuvers. Brewery reps moan about having to deal with a dozen or so stubbornly idiosyncratic lorry drivers and miners, thoroughly schooled in the trade union arts of bluff and counter-bluff. And a rock guitarist I talked to at Cramlington complained that club committees were the worst employers he'd ever had. "Understandable, I suppose. They have to take orders all day. But as soon as they put that badge on, *they're* the gaffer." Yet to be elected to committee is the acme of every true clubman's ambition.



The fact remains that despite the prevailing atmosphere of amateurism run riot, most clubs seem to be run with astonishing competence. And, as a glance at the Cramlington balance sheet suggests, they are almost perversely profitable. Indeed, the clubs are so lucrative that the big breweries virtually go cap in hand, begging to lend them money, forty or fifty thousand pounds at a whack, at nil interest, in hopes of tying a club to its particular brand name. Almost always, these hopes are dashed. The club promptly pays off the loan, then blithely opens its cellars to rival firms.

Newcastle is also home of the Northern Clubs Federation Brewery—the clubs' own. Each Northumbrian club has a share in the "Fed" which started during World War I when two clubmen, incensed by rocketing beer prices, ran it from a horse and wagon. Today the "Fed" produces 12,000 barrels a week, and has just built a second brewery at Dunston-on-Tyne which is going to tackle the big monopolies head-on by exporting to the rest of England. I had to laugh when the Fed's brewmaster complained to me of a long strike the company had just fought with its own teamsters. "Bloody unreasonable they were, too," he said. "They treated us just like some ordinary gaffer."

Ironically, clubland's financial viability, capitalist in all but name, stems from its socialist roots. By law, a working men's club, registered under the Friendly Societies Act, must be owned by the membership; dividends must be redistributed in the form of cheaper beer, more expensive entertainment or larger and plusher premises. The clubs deliberately operate on a profit margin about twenty percent lower than most pubs. And—for all their hard-headed northern practicality, clubmen often speak with an odd mix of Non-Conformist religion, radical idealism and a mutual help ethic going back at least 200 years. "Aye, we manage to keep afloat," one of Cramlington's committee men sums up. "Anything more'd be greed, 'n't it?"

The next night, Sunday, Tom helps me sample a downmarket scene. Byker and Heaton Union Club, Newcastle, want him to arrange the acts for a gala weekend; tonight there

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A club interior. . .

is only a tired looking organist slightly out of synch with his drummer. The small, shabby smoky room is packed with men who clearly don't want to be interrupted in their drinking by entertainment—or by women, who are less in evidence here than at any other club we've visited. It's the sort of place I'd think twice about entering alone. The club secretary is reserved, even brusque at first, but he cannot resist putting me right about his clu'. He is mildly contemptuous of big palaces like Cramlington. "Riff raff," he snorts. His own club is proudly eccentric; it refuses to affiliate to the Club and Institute Union, which coordinates almost every other club I've seen. He is very firm about his club's origins: however tatty it may be now, it started life as a social center for shopkeepers and business men. It is registered, not as a Friendly Society, but as a private company, with its 999 members as shareholders. Once a year the profits are distributed directly to members—though, alas, there's not so much to go around.

In the dimly lit upstairs committee room with its peeling wallpaper and old photographs, I feel, briefly, as if I've stepped back into the Thirties. Most clubs run money lotteries. But at Byker and Heaton, you compete for a "meat draw"—the prize a frozen hunk of lamb or beef. The secretary refuses to take the frayed little booklet of bylaws from the safe until I promise not to quote from it without permission or, under threat of Lord knows what punishment, to show it to outsiders. "Otherwise," he says, looking me sternly in the eye, "Ah c'd be impeached for showin' these to a Non-Member."

It's easy to scoff at such Masonic earnestness. But right on cue, as we come down to the main bar, a man at a fruit (slot) machine swears loudly when his jackpot refuses to come up. Article 22, and I quote with permission, states "no bad language, disturbance, quarreling or betting shall be allowed." And when the loudmouth at the one-armed bandit continues cussing, the secretary, a smallish, sixtyish man primly dressed in a blue suit and his hair cut short-back-and-sides once popular with demobbed World War II soldiers, taps the offender, a huge bruiser, on the shoulder. And that is that.

And as the night wears on, it strikes me more and more that, despite the vast quantities of booze being consumed by tough, often rough working men, there is nothing remotely resembling violence. "Come on—play the game," a concert secretary may admonish an audience heckling an act. And it works. People at Byker and Heaton are talking about yesterday's football riot. "Oh aye," says a jobless painter from one of the closed ship-building yards in nearby South Shields, "th' same lads as tossed that bomb c'd be members of this very clu'. But they wouldn't say tickyboo here. It's their clu', y'see. And anyway, they know they'd be sorted out quick enough."

"Sorting out" can be infinitely subtle. I have seen frail and geriatric committee men silence troublemakers with a single, severe glance. Working men's clubs never use bouncers, never need bouncers. (The exception, as we shall see, is Liverpool.) The ultimate threat—suspension or even expulsion—is enough. To be kicked out of one's club is a social disgrace second to none. It also means being barred from all Club and Institute Union (CIU) affiliates up and down the country. As a foundry-man at the bar explains, "Nobody blinked an eye up at th' housin' estate when Ah did a li'l porridge (jail time). Bu' when Ah was suspended temporary from clu'—not even expelled, mind—for rough words tae a steward, ye'd have thought Ah was Judas himself for th' luiks Ah got." And looks, in England, count as a way of enforcing the rules.

* * *

Club history is lost in the mists of the early Industrial Revolution. As more and more people moved to the towns, as new industries changed the character of life even in the smallest villages, the clubs seem to have grown up as part of a proliferation of new workers' organisations–rudimentary trade unions, Mutual Improvement Societies, Mechanics Institutes and Libraries. It was partly self-help; partly an outgrowth of the evangelical sects that swept the country in the late 18th century. The old paternalist aristocracy, and the new mill and mine owners, certainly encouraged the movement. Their aim, I suppose, was to keep the workers away from the twin evils of gin and revolution. In 1862 a former Chartist sympathiser, the Reverend Henry Solly, founded the Club and Institute Union, with the active support of a clutch of high-minded dukes, politicians and churchmen. Temperance was the watchword. But almost immediately the clubs went wet, a practice introduced by a Dorsetshire clergyman blessedly named Horlock Bastard.

Many of the clubs retain names that suggest a now-forgotten political intransigence in the founders. A roll call of names conjures up old and bitter political battles: Attercliffe Radical, Grimsby Social Reform, Dewsbury Socialist, Burnley Irish Democratic League Social, Monkwearmouth Democratic League Social, Balsall Heath Labour, and even the Blaenclydach Marxian. The latter is called "the Max" these days; its glass case still proudly displays a first edition of Das Kapital. *But a Rhondda miner sighed*

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ruefully to me: "What a pity no one can get at the book any more. Our club secretary, foolish man, went and lost the key. He says it was a mishap, and I say it was a prophecy, no?"

How political were they, I wonder, even in the early days? Nobody remembers. Certainly the CIU boasts its neutrality. I often came across clubs that have institutionalized their impartiality: my favorite is the Tonyrefail Non Political, located in Rear of the Mill Street in Glamorgan. Some of the Conservative clubs still screen applicants through a political Means Test. But on the whole, the old labels seem to have lost their potency. Tories easily join Labour Clubs, atheist socialists are Life Members of Catholic clubs. The important thing, everyone assures me, is to "fit in to clu'." Fit in politically? I ask. The question is faintly embarrassing. "It's a way of life like no other" the answer comes back, all over the country–as if an outsider like me could never really hope to understand.

Only occasionally, running disguised but insistent through the jokes and comic patter of the entertainers, I can hear the ancient political battle cries, and an even more ancient cynicism. I've been hearing variations of this joke in clubs for the last fifteen years, and it never fails to have audiences rolling in the aisles. An elderly worker is dying; a life-long member of the Labour Party. Breathing his last, he sends for the local Conservative agent and insists on signing up with the opposition. His horrified mates rush to the bedside. "Man, are you daft? Why are you deserting us?" "Because," he replies with his last gasp, "I'd rather have one o' them bastards go than one o' us."

Second City

I have been an Al Showman groupie since the great explosion of cabaret in the Sixties. He's still one of clubland's premier comics. Showman is not exactly a household name even in England, but on the northern club circuit he's a prince of the realm. Tonight Al is off to what he calls a "turn right at the gasworks" type of job, at Chambers Colliery Club in Oldham, just outside Manchester. Along the way he's picked up an ex-stripper called Sherry, and me.

It's a reunion. Al, Sherry and I have not seen one another since the good old nights ten years ago when Al, then playing up to four or five clubs a night, often compered strippers like Sherry. I remember her as a plump, freshfaced Irish girl just off the Belfast ferry. Now stouter and older, but no less feisty, Sherry laughs at her youthful naiveté. "How I got started? My girl friend got sick and asked me to fill in at the last minute. I was so dumb I didn't know you went off after five or ten minutes. So I just stood there on stage, it felt like an hour, trying to think of different things to do. They went wild. And I thought, well, that wasn't too difficult, was it?" Since then, she's also had a career as 'Battling Mollie Malone,' the Irish women's wrestling champion. "Maybe because I was the only lady wrestler there." Now she and her husband manage a strippers' agency employing sixty girls. A strip program is a Thursday fixture in many clubs; and so is Sunday lunchtime strip.

It's a sparsely attended Wednesday night at Chambers Colliery. A familiar scene: another large anonymous building on the edge of a council estate, another empty field where there was once a coal mine. Al has arrived early to get a fix on the audience from a ringside table. He doesn't much like what he sees. There are 60 or 70 people in a club that could hold 600; an m.c. who, failing to get a rise from the audience, exhorts them impatiently to cheer up; and a Tom Jones-style singer of limitless arrogance and small talent. "This crowd's as dead as cold mutton," Al mutters. "I'll have my work cut out."

In the normal sense, Al Showman is not a blue comic. "Oh yes, I muck it up from time to time," he explains in his thin, innocent voice, "but it goes in phases. I was clean for a long time, now th' trend is in t'other direction. You have to change pace or you die." This is a little disingenuous of Al. He claims that children's pantomime is his true delight—he's just done a Christmas season at Norwich—but his real talent is for down-and-dirty at the clubs. "Did you hear the one about the Irish nun who sent away for a vibrator? Three days later she'd lost all her front teeth," is one of his milder efforts. But the essence of his comic genius, and I think it is that, is his firm grasp of the contradiction between the utter respectability of his audience, and their profound attachment to, and familiarity with, a blunt earthy humor that pre-dates even the music halls.

Al does not physically dominate; he is rather small and diffident, elfin even. His technique is maidenauntish, sly, a little insinuating. He hardly moves his body at all, except to simulate the sex act in some songs. His instrument of control is his voice: crisp, piercingly clear, absolutely precise. He does not muffle with any of the sniggering forms of self-congratulation lesser comedians muddy their acts with. Like David flinging stones at a room-full of Goliaths, he zings in the one or two-liners. He works fast, but unhurriedly. If a joke dies, he lets it go without apology, without trying to cover up.

And gradually the act builds. The 'back' provides a muted musical background to Al's patter, a mixture of ethnic slurs ("All right, we'll sing a hymn now, Christians Awake Or The Jews'll Get Your Money") and what Al calls "mucky." A seemingly inexhaustible cast of transvestite butlers, super-phallic Black Panthers, ineptly circumcised rabbis, farting policemen, effeminate cabinet ministers, emasculated Ayatollahs and slow witted Irish animal-buggerers begin, surrealistically, to invade the hall. A rising crescendo of laughter greets his cornucopia of burst condoms, threatened penises, tampax-stuffed vaginas, and faeces. All around me, women are laughing as hard as men, teenagers, at first slow to clue in, joining in as eagerly as their elders. Sometimes I think that working men's clubs are the only places in Britain which mend the generation gap.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Al begins to lose the audience. He senses it, works closer to the microphone, tries to bring them back with a reprise of his theme song, the old and plaintive

> Down in Picadilly
> There are naughty women
> They will do anything you want
> For a shilling. . .

He attempts one or two sure-fire crowd pleasers: impersonations of bygone performers like George Formby and George Robey, jokes about TV series like Coronation Street, some cracks about the ever-useful Jeremy Thorpe. Then he goes for broke with a heartfelt Aznavour ballad which, to use his phrase, "dies on its arse." He gracefully bows out of the bull-ring, where he has escaped with his life but not slain the animal.

And in the Ford Fiesta traveling the A-62 back to Manchester, he's

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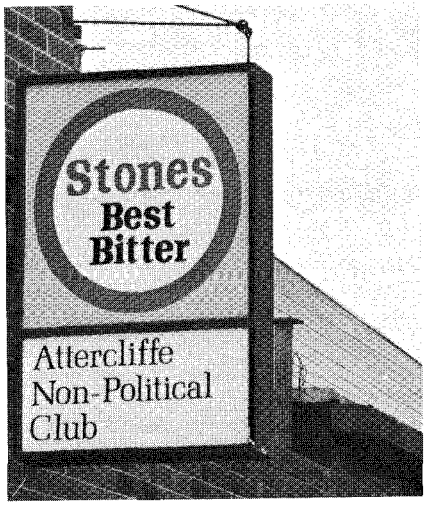
pale and drained. "Mid weeks are getting harder. Or maybe I'm getting older. They make you dig it out at the coal face, don't they?"

Al's father was a Yorkshire miner who disapproved of his son's choice of profession. "To him you were rubbish if you didn't work with your hands. Maybe that's why the audience is always ready to turn on you. They don't make in a week what I do in a night. They want their money's worth, in blood." He looks over at me and smiles tiredly. "Aye, bah goom," he puts on a thick Lancashire accent, "bu' it beats workin', any road."

The distinctive quality of all northern comics is their intimacy with the audience. They are often, quite literally, in touch. They jump off the stage and move among the tables; the audience expects to be hauled from their chairs and used as props in a comic routine. Insulting the patrons has become a high art. Some comedians admit they couldn't work without this bond with the punters, the cozy togetherness always ready to turn into blatant hostility. A tired, middle-aged comic-cum-magician in Wolverhampton talked to me in his kitchen, with the laundry hanging from a clothesline over the breakfast table. "Listen, I haven't done original material in twenty years. Concert secs would chuck me out if I did. They want something familiar, see. It's not just the patter, it's how you deliver it. That changes every night. Got to. I need the smell, the touch, the feel of those bastards out there—I need to get in among them—see if they crack—bend them to me. If necessary yell at them, SHUT YIR BLOODY GREAT GOBS! Break their bloody will before they break me. They respect that. We're hard people up here. Inside hard."



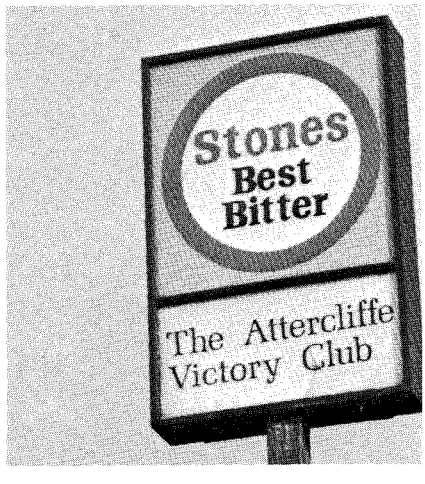
Perhaps the riskiest act of all in the working men's clubs is drag. As witness, the following evening, when Bunny Lewis, 'King of the Northern Drag Queens,' has a tricky time at the Philharmonic W.M.C. in Blackpool. It's almost a disaster.

We've driven out from Manchester, Bunny's home, with him resplendent in his black and gold miniskirt ("my going to work outfit") just in case any of his immense public catches sight of him en route. He has been appearing as a spectacular, curvy woman for more than twenty years. Like Danny La Rue, he wears stunningly sequinned floor-length gowns, extravagantly bouffant wigs; he takes an hour and a half to make up in thirteen careful stages ("The eyes are the crucial part"). He is also a very witty mimic, and amazingly sexy, despite the fact that when one does see him in men's clothes, he's a strongly built, tough chunk of a guy. The first time we met, at the Devonshire Arms pub in Manchester in 1970, I had little experience of drag. When he came and sat next to me in the intermission I found to my surprise that I was beginning to flirt with him. He stuck an elbow in my ribs. "Go a little further, my son," he growled, "and you'll get the surprise of your life." We've been friends ever since.

Bunny calls his act "glamor drag" and takes it seriously. "I may camp it up a bit," he analyzes his art, "but it doesn't do to disturb people too much. They get enough of that in real life. Women used to see me as a bit of a rival. But I've got them with me now." His fairy tale take-offs—most recently a long-running 'Mother Goosed'—are incredibly popular in the Lancashire clubs. His special pique is some of the up-and-coming, would-be drag artistes. "They're too heavy. Half of the kids want the old trans-sex operation. Makes 'em too prissy. My secret is, the audience know I'm a real man playing a real woman, not a bloody 'alf and 'alf." He sighs. "It's all this Gay Lib bit, if you ask me. It's so easy nowadays. Gays say to themselves, 'Who cares anyway?' But it messes up their act."

Bunny began well tonight, kicking off with his usual Marlene Dietrich impersonation ("See what the boys in the back room have got/ And tell them I've got one the same. . . "), switches to Sophie Tucker, then Gypsy Rose Lee without really doing a strip. All the time he's having to cope with a rowdy, heavily-drinking Blackpool crowd. He manages to persuade a group of startled, middle-aged housewives who've never seen him before into helpless giggles, skillfully parries shouts and crude cracks from some drunks at the front tables. But he almost loses his hold when, as usual, he invites some of his audience to join in a skit called 'Cinderfeller.' One of the volunteers, a hulking 20-year-old drunker than he looks, turns out to be a "wrong 'un," bent on sabotaging the act and taking off on an ego trip of his own. He keeps interrupting Bunny's songs, spoils his tag lines, and comments viciously to the audience about Bunny's sexuality. For a moment it looks quite ugly. Usually, Bunny's double entendres about homosexuals ("Once upon a time there were two queers. Now there's bloody thousands of 'em,") go down well. Tonight, the drunk's nastiness touches off a hostility to homosexuals that's always just below the surface in working class England.

But Bunny's sheer professionalism carries it off. He manages, through a combination of no-nonsense pushing and satirically loving nudges, to shoo the men off the stage for his finale, "I'm only a poor little drag-on." Then something happens, so corny I can hardly believe it. A teenage girl jumps up from a table near the stage and reaches up to embrace Bunny, now on the closing bars of "All of me, I want you to take all of me. . . " I had noticed her earlier; she is obviously mentally retarded, I think a mongol. She's been dazzled and delighted all evening by Bunny's sequinned glitter. Bunny, ever the old pro, helps her up on stage, and he, the m.c. and the female singer line up with the kid, arms around each other, to sing



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"You'll Never Walk Alone," the football song that is the unofficial national anthem to half of England. The crowd, only moments before ready to savage Bunny, happily join the hymn. And the evening, on a thin edge for so long, ends in a haze of sentimental good feeling. There's no biz like show business.

* * *

There is an alchemy to a good club evening. I have seen it work many times: the healing of personal and community wounds through shared laughter, through drink, through boredom or even hostility to a duff turn. Yet there is no getting away from the awfulness of much club humor, which can be staggeringly sexist and racist. Many, if not most jokes are unprintable. They return obsessively to a few themes–impotence, sterility, illegitimacy, male weakness and female sluttishness. There are evenings when every joke seems to take place in the lavatory. Brutal jokes about West Indians or Pakis are club staples, and traditional cracks about the moronic Irish have taken on a new bitterness over the last few years. Jews and homosexuals are always good for a laugh, and the recent Jeremy Thorpe trial was God's gift to the club comics.

Yet the "big" club comics in the north have a popularity no southerner, not even an international star, could ever match. "People couldn't survive up here without laughter, you know," Al Showman says. "The odds are stacked against them."

And comedians like Al and Bunny, like 80-year old Bobby Thompson in Newcastle, Bobby Knutt in Sheffield, younger men like Bob Williamson in Bolton, all know the odds as well as their audiences. They speak to the most intimate anxieties and expectations; more keenly than any sociologists, they chart the precise ups-and-downs of the industrial towns which are their basic venue. "It's got so, in these parts, I can tell from the way they do or don't laugh at my opening line, not only if the home team won or lost, but by how many points," claimed one comic from football-crazy Liverpool.

There is an identity of class experience and values between performer and audience. The pros live in the community they entertain, and their local feelings are intense. Their acts don't always travel well, but even if they've made it in London or overseas–Al Showman, for example, has found a regular audience among nostalgic immigrants to Australia–they tend to come home. Call it regionalism, roots or lack of ambition. I kept asking performers why they didn't go London-ways where the living might be richer. Bob Williamson, a successful Manchester satirist with "I'm nearly famous" painted on his guitar, shrugged. "Too lazy, I suppose. The English disease. Me mates are all up here. I'd wither up like an old raisin anywhere else. Anyway, London beer's like piss."

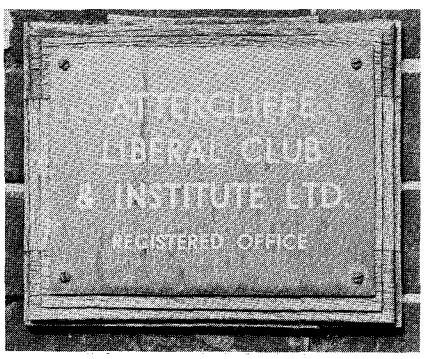
Stars like Bunny or Al or Bob may be "on" one or two hundred pounds a week, or if times are good, a night. (The wage phraseology derives from a miner's piece work rate.) But they know, and they know the audiences know that they know, that good times can evaporate overnight. A textile or steel-worker's job, an entire plant, can disappear in a twinkling. "Just like with us stage folk, darling," says Bunny.

Clubland is an empire of free entertainment. As a matter of routine, audiences expect two or three live acts a night, for nothing more than the nominal entrance fee. At the bottom of this pyramid of talent is the semi-pro. There is no end to the supply of hopeful performers, men and women with regular jobs, the same as their audience. They wait for the big break or, knowing it will never come, have grown to depend on the extra £25 or so an evening. The cruel, classic comment by concert secretaries auditioning such talent is: "Lad, don't give up your day job just yet."

The rise and fall of the club stars is a mirror of the unpredictable swings and roundabouts of any northern labourer's life. Cautionary tales abound. Wayne Fontana, once the £1000 a night leader of the Mind Benders pop group, is making a fair living these days in the Manchester working men's clubs. He deliberately plays up the riches to rags angle of his career. As we watched him performing at the Farnsworth Ex-Servicemens, someone remarked wryly, "Up here, we like a story with a good dramatic twist."

Merseyside

Manchester and Liverpool are only 35 miles apart. Psychologically and culturally, they are in different worlds. Landlocked Manchester is still somehow Victorian; it's always been prosperous, even a little stolid. It prides itself both on its suburbs and



on its long tradition of respectable working class activism. By contrast, the port of Liverpool lives on its wits and wit. A curious glamor hangs on. Though, like so many industrial cities, it has been devastated by the planners, it remains one of the most beautiful of all British cities, with its elegant gray Georgian terraces—built on slave trade profits—and its monstrously impressive 19th century Anglican Cathedral.

Yet Liverpool has always been volatile, racially and politically explosive. Its seaways lead out to Ireland, and beyond, to the Atlantic; until recently, it was a great trading port, one of the ports of entry and exit, and for generations it had probably the biggest black population in Britain. Today, the typical "scouse" might be Irish, Welsh, Lancashire—or African. Black merchant sailors have been disembarking (or jumping ship) in Mersey harbor for decades, marrying local girls; their startlingly handsome children are now in the fourth or fifth generation. Scouses are too hip to turn to stare, in that peculiarly English judging way, at interracial couples. John Conteh, the recently deposed light-heavyweight world champion, is the son of a Sierra Leone seaman who married a clippie (ticket puncher) from a Liverpool tramcar. Boxing, poetry, street theatre, and of course music—Liverpool is famous for them all. The great days of the Beatles are long gone, but there is still, I discovered, an avant-garde teenage musical subculture, these days heavily and adventurously into "tu-tone," that curious mix of rock and reggae.

Liverpool is cosmopolitan, sophisticated, deeply divided. It is also the only major British city where the club scene is violent: murder, arson, kidnappings, corruption on a scale that seems unknown elsewhere. In the North Sea port of Newcastle, in some ways just as violent and as ravaged by industrial disaster, I soon learned to feel secure and even at home. In Liverpool, which I've been visiting for twenty years, I kept looking over my shoulder. I am used to walking alone at night in the industrial streets of the north. Yet I quickly succumbed to the warnings of hotel porters, taxi drivers, people I talked to casually in the Liverpool clubs. "I don't go into the city at night—too much like New York," they'd say. In the working-class district of Anfield, which I used to explore on foot till

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dawn, I hailed a cab from one club to another only a few hundred yards away.

Violent crime is so bad that the Chief Constable has warned that the city centre, ten years ago the place where everyone went for a night out, might need "an army of occupation." In effect, the area between the Cathedral and Pierhead, where most of the inner-city clubs operate, is occupied at weekends by a fearsome alliance of club bouncers and teams of Liverpool bobbies with German Shepherd dogs.

I had lunch with a former manager of a club which the police had just closed down in an attempt to assert their authority in Liverpool's crime-ridden centre. He seemed philosophical about police-civilian relationships. "There's always been a sort of ecology of the fist here," he explained. "People accept a 'normal' level of police battering. Your average Scouse has always been easy with his bare knuckles. For years, nobody complained when the coppers laid into them. Fair's fair. But it's different now. They hit first and ask questions after. And that goes for the muggers too. No more rules, Queensberry or unwritten." He was uncertain about the reasons behind the rising violence. The IRA, which uses Liverpool as a port of entry, has made the cops more nervous; plus the level of unemployment—even higher in Liverpool, a declining port not backed up by industry of mining.

And with its more transient, less homogeneous population, Liverpool has never quite developed the normal pattern of clubs essentially run by members. My ex-manager friend reminds me that most Liverpool clubs are, and always have been, privately owned; the club doesn't belong to the members in the same way, and there's a turnover in clientele I found nowhere else in the country. "So, of course," he smiles thinly, "we need the second arm of Liverpool law enforcement—the doormen."

Bouncers are the hard men, the real rulers, of Liverpool club life. Like the police, they are almost a law unto themselves, reputed to carry a truly frightening assortment of weapons. I never actually got close enough to see them, but I was assured, by club goers, that under their tuxedos they had stashed away coshes, lead pipes, brass knuckles. The bouncers themselves hinted darkly at shooters. The latest fashion in cutting implements are "Stanley knives," used in the building trade to cut into linoleum, with a stubby solid handle and a short ugly blade which reputedly does more damage than the traditional flick because the wrist has more leverage. The gangs which use this weapon to such terrifying effect are called "the Stanley boys."

Violence easily becomes part of the legend in the Liverpool clubs. Everyone talks about the night some bouncers crashed into the home of a Liverpool man who had, several hours earlier, created a disturbance at a club. The sleeping man woke to find the thugs wielding an axe and threatening to cut off his feet; he somehow escaped, naked, only to fall, or be pushed, headlong through a plate-glass window.

Liverpool clubs are guarded like Fort Knox. Men hired to keep a "tight door" eye the visitor as if sizing him up for a quick ten rounds. Their aim is to get your money (£2 or £3 as against the 40 pence in most working men's clubs), keep you quiet, or efficiently dust you off at the slightest sign of trouble. Indeed, I was reliably told of a club whose aggressive bouncers demand payment from patrons coming in—*and* leaving.

There is a sound business reason for hiring the heavies. Liverpool police, faced with the problem of

Hard times–except at the bar. . .

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keeping the lid on a city dying with a bang not a whimper, are quick to shut down clubs perceived as disorderly. This may have more to do with the moral prejudices of the Police Authority than with any actual trouble. Shortly before I arrived, Eric's, an upmarket club hot on music, was padlocked, while some of the city's sleaziest dives operate without interference.

Of all the Liverpool clubs, I felt comfortable only in the CIU-tied Anfield Dockers Club, whose books may be closed to new members but which warmly welcomes visiting Americans because so many port workers have relatives in the USA. But in the other, private clubs there was noticeably less audience involvement and, maybe for that reason, a drunken squabble seemed more likely to flare into something nasty.

"You don't want to get th' wrong idea about us," said the only bouncer I had the courage to approach. He was one of five or six gorillas-in-tuxedos "on the door" of a club near Lime Street Station, and he was bored because it was still early. (Liverpool clubs, unlike most others, don't buzz till the pubs empty out at eleven p.m.) "We're just like your average docker or bus driver, except you train for this job, you do. Like what American footballers do, y'know, from the time you're a youth. Traditional, like. Though the Yanks have got all that padding 'n all to protect them and you have only these." He held out his paws and his voice grew piteous. "They'll tell you we're the hard men, gangsters and the like. But we're only ordinary working chaps. Auxiliary police, that's us. We work with the coppers, not against them. We can do what they can't. Yobboes and trouble makers come and we smash their faces in if they take liberties. It's a vocational skill, like."

Saturday night I club-crawl, ending up at the She, a multi-level cabaret discotheque on Victoria Street. The name of the manager gets me past the usual press gang of gentlemen with long arms and wide shoulders, and I sit in a booth wondering why anyone would prefer a club like this to a brightly-lit, rousing working men's club. Sex, maybe? This, it gradually comes to me, is more a pick-up joint. Two girls sit brooding into their shandies a couple of booths away, and beyond them four rugby-built youths eye them, and the rest of the room, aggressively. Before I know it, the girls have moved to my booth and have begun a desultory conversation. What am I going to do with them? I think nervously. Or have they picked me out as safely middle-aged? All my Chicago instincts tell me to split, but I've grown so used to casually friendly chats with women and men in clubs that I don't smell trouble until too late. When the girls look up behind me, my heart sinks.

"We was wonderin', old pal, if these young ladies were bothering you?" says the barrel-chested hulk towering over me. Behind him, his three mates look as if they eat roving reporters for lunch. Briefly I grasp at a fleeting image of myself as Captain America, look back at the four toughs, contemplate the stairs where several lounging bouncers are noting us. I decide to take on the civilians. "Svenska. Polski. Nov schmoz ka pop," I mutter cravenly. The girls, with whom I'd been chatting easily a few minutes before, look at me strangely. But I am already, with an ingratiating foreigner's smile, pushing past Barrel Chest, maneuvering past the bouncers up into the fresh air. In Liverpool clubs these nights, discretion is the better part of survival.

* * *

England is an electronic culture like the USA, apparently homogenized; its comparative smallness would argue a greater degree of centralization. Certainly it's been hit all over by recession: I saw so many devastated urban landscapes, so many high-rise council estates replacing older villages, so many bland shopping centres built over and suffocating quirky 19th century neighborhoods. But I sometimes felt that the clubs were the primary institutions preserving a stubborn, sometimes irritating, un-organizable sense of locality.

It is in the clubs, and perhaps only in the clubs, that you can still discover regional pride, a bloody-minded survivors' courage that once was the making of this country. Logically, Liverpool, Huddersfield, Bradford, all the one-industry towns of Cumbria or Tyneside or South Wales should be preparing their funeral wakes–or, as the government blandly phrases it, "re-locating." But against all the odds, large numbers of Britons refuse to budge from the districts where their great-great-grandfathers first settled. Maybe it's pure stubbornness, or maybe a shrewd sense that over the hill the pasture may not really be greener.

I was constantly surprised, traveling through club-land, by the humor, the determination, and by a passionate love of a particular place. And also by a sense of tradition: of a living heritage being passed from father to son. In the clubs, I sometimes felt I was reaching back, through old men's talk, to a pre-1914 world, even as far back as Queen Victoria's time. The occasional pomposity of some committee men, the apparently trivial but unbreakable rules–these came to seem part of a moving determination to protect something that is theirs, *and that is still alive. I re-discovered in the clubs something I've forgotten living in London–the quiet defiance of people determined to make their own lives and their own styles.*

The Welsh Valleys

I confess that parts of my South Wales weekend are a blur. I am reasonably certain I commuted madly by van, between Mardy Miners Club in the "little Rhondda" and Glyneath Miners Club in the Neath Valley. My escort and guide is a young ex-miner and former professional rugby wing half. (Even now, coal and rugby are Glamorgan's staple exports.)

Cliff, 29, represents a new generation of valley boys. He has gone away to grander places—to university at Oxford—but keeps returning. It is not ordinary Welsh nationalism, ascendant in recent years, that fires him. It is the centuries-old saga—tragedy, really—of the South Wales colliers in which Cliff feels he must play a part. He's wangled the perfect job: as an oral historian, he wanders up and down the valleys interviewing old miners about the General Strike, the lockouts, the cave-ins and hunger marches. The picket line battles and pit disasters are his Thermopylae and Agincourt. In a way, he reminds me of young Israelis, who speak easily of ancient history, as if the Flood happened only yesterday. When Cliff and his friends talk, the past is present, and half-forgotten battles are still being fought. Yet it's not just nostalgia, for they see the past as the raw material for a world still coming into being.

Cliff is determined I shall see and understand the coal valleys—Rhondda, Tawe, Afan, Aberdare—before they disappear. "It is like watching a great city crumble into the dust," he says as we begin a night's serious drinking. The idea of the val-

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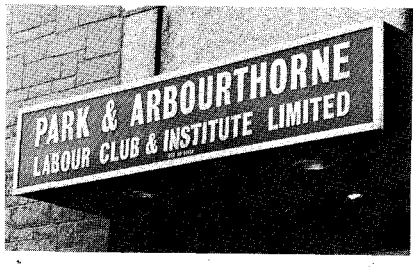

leys as urban is new to me. But Cliff, who loves the place with an almost sexual intensity, insists that the coal-based culture which sprang up in the tiny villages from Merthyr Tydfil to Llanilid, was highly literate, sophisticated and internationalist in outlook.

Many of the working men's clubs in the valleys began as Miners' Libraries. Before 1910, almost every mining village and town had its own library or Literary and Scientific Institute. Without universal state secondary education, penned up in cramped lodgings, the young men who came from all over Britain to dig Rhondda coal made the back rooms their informal universities. The libraries have almost disappeared now, and Cliff and friends his age speak longingly of the vanished culture. "My father's generation was the last to treasure the written word," says one of them. "They used to read the Bible and *Das Kapital* with equal fervor." But the spoken word in the valleys is as vital and musical as ever; the most taciturn miner can suddenly be moved to the most startling and moving flights of rhetoric and imagery. The Irish are supposed to be the great talkers; but the Welsh, to my ear, speak even more seductively.

Unlike any other club I've visited, in the Mardy Miners' the evening's gossip is pure politics. Friday night and upstairs in the concert hall there's a disco pounding. But in the downstairs lounge, strewn with copies of everything from the *Daily Mirror* and *Sporting Life* to *Soviet Weekly* and the Communist *Morning Star,* the miners just up from late shift sit round in quiet groups, drinking their pints and arguing about the still-current steel strike. Almost alone among South Wales pits, Mardy has just voted to strike in sympathy. The post mortem is passionate, yet proceeds with a kind of stately courtesy. Some Mardy men feel betrayed by the president of the South Wales Miners Union who had called for the sympathy strike but failed dismally to rally the other pits. "Emlyn, now, he didn't plow the field did he?" a little dark miner asks me pointedly. "You must first plow the field and give plenty of time for the seed to ripen, if you want to harvest the whirlwind of revolution. Is that not right, comrade?"

Although I am a complete stranger, they make a deliberate attempt to include me. Passionately interested in world affairs—several had fathers who fought with the Loyalists in the Spanish Civil War—they are used to palavering easily with Russian, Polish and even Chinese colliers who have visited "Red Mardy." And they have a soft spot for Americans. John L. Lewis, the former head of the United Mine Workers of America, used to boast of his South Wales lineage; and a Mardy delegation has just returned from a visit to the Appalachian coal fields. The delegates plunge into debate with me about why the American miners, who overwhelmed them with friendship, seemed so shocked by the radicalism of their guests. A large, bearded miner who looks like Abe Lincoln's brother taps me on the knee. "Nice boys, those born-against Christians in the West Virginia pits. But they just couldn't get it into their heads," he explains, "that in our valleys socialism is the religion. We could never understand their backwardness." Several of his friends move closer when I begin to argue back. It seems to me, I say, that the Welsh themselves are a little backward in their grasp of the psychology of American workers, who often combine religion with militance. In no time the big dogmatic miner and I are going at it hammer and tong, to the obvious pleasure of half the lounge. A good argument is their favorite indoor sport.

At this point, Cliff decides to drag me diplomatically away. He regards these men as his fathers, and it wouldn't do to let things get out of hand. Anyway, it's Friday night: women, not politics, are on his mind. He whips me off to where he hopes the action will be, in a club over the hill in the next valley.

Glyneath Welfare Club used to be a miners' library, then briefly was converted to a cinema. Now the club stands guard over a community whose two nearest pits are threatened by closure. Glyneath miners seem less obviously ideological than Mardy's, but Cliff warns me not to make too much of that. "I've been on the picket line with these boys. Hard, hard as bloody anthracite they are," he says a shade boastfully. But the Glyneath clubmen are also gentle and tactful with strangers. The night I spend with a few "old" miners (forty or thereabouts) is not altogether clear in my mind. That is mainly due to a surfeit of a drink which they imbibe like mother's milk. "Blue Moon"—be warned—is Cointreau mixed with fizzy lemonade. Aiye!

Sitting with Albert Niners, Billy Sunshine and Morris, I sip Blue Moons and watch Cliff dice with death by flirting outrageously with the local women. "Oh, man," he surveys the crowded dance floor, "I've been east and I've been west, but Rhondda women are the best." He urges me on to the floor. "Get stuck in, Clancy—the boys won't mind." The hell they won't, I think, after a glance at a dance floor full of boogeying Rocky Grazianos just up from pit. But Cliff moves in, cutting in where he pleases, chatting up and making dates indiscriminately. One girl, with a huge miner named Tony, agrees to go out with Cliff. I wince inwardly, and wait for the battle to commence. But Glyneath miners hardly ever need to demonstrate their macho outside the pit or rugby pitch; and Tony and Cliff seem to understand each other well enough. All Tony does is reach up from the table, grab Cliff affectionately round the neck, and whisper hoarsely into his ear, "Permission granted, boyo. I put the hard drill head in—you exploit the seam."

The language of mining crops up in every aspect of their lives from sex to shopping. And mining—its craft and its legends—is what the talk always returns to. Before long, the men at my table are like ex-RAF pilots describing old dog fights; when I miss some of the technical details, they use their hands to describe the exact slant of a shaft, or the angle of a pneumatic drill that had extricated them from a cave-in. Morris reminisces about an accident which trapped him, some mates and several young apprentices who began to panic. "Well, you know, I thought: if these lads go mad, it will be the end of us all. So I calmed them with a little humor. 'Well boys,' I said, addressing the more experienced among us, but with a hungry eye on the apprentices, 'Who do we eat first?' " Morris broke an arm in that incident; they all have close friends who have been killed or maimed

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Clubmember & grandchild. . .

down the mine. But they don't dwell on any of that. What comes across, more than anything else, is a kind of affection for their work, and for the deep pit they go down into every day. Towards closing time Albert Niners (so called because he introduced the game 'nine card brag' to the club) is murmuring, half to himself. "The earth, you know. She goes to sleep. Around three in the morning. Down in the bowels of the shaft, the earth is resting. I come on shift at 4:30 and I wake her up."

Friday night at Glyneath ends with Cliff making dates with three women, two for the same evening. "Don't worry, Clancy, it'll sort itself out. Must do, musn't it? Anyway, you can't live forever." Ever since Cliff left the pit and later gave up pro football, he's been looking for new ways to live dangerously. Now it's my turn to drag him out of the club before trouble starts.

On the way home, we stop off in Aberdare to pick up Cliff's younger brother staying at the home of a friend, Dafydd, whose miner father had died of emphysema the previous weekend. We all pop down to the local British Legion club, 'The Shot and Shell.' The 18-year old Dafydd had been inducted into the club only a few days before his father collapsed. He is depressed, but his spirits rise a little when the older men in the club leave their drinks, singly and in pairs, and quietly come over to pay their respects. There is something deeply moving about the way the club members, some in their seventies, make a special point of accepting Dafydd. I have a feeling of something almost tangible being passed from one generation to another. Over the snooker table, I remark to Dafydd that the so-called generation gap seems to exist everywhere—except in the clubs. Surely he can't have that much in common with these retired miners and survivors from the First World War? Dafydd looks puzzled. "But why should I hate the old men? I respect what they went through. I know what they are. I like what they are."

The next morning Cliff, his brother, Dafydd and I pile into the van for a wild thirty minutes' drive to put me aboard the London train at Swansea. It is also a fast daylight tour of the Neath and Rhondda valleys. On wind-swept hills above a disused mine shaft we catch a glimpse of wild ponies galloping into the distance towards the cloud-shrouded Brecons. And all the time, in the van, the boys keep pumping me full of the legend and lore of the valleys as if wanting me to carry some long-lost message out into the world.

Swansea station, the train already moving. Cliff pushes me aboard the last coach, Dafydd slings my bag after me, we breathlessly wave goodbye. Along the Bristol Channel the train picks up speed, past the great Port Talbot steel works (will it still be open this time next year?). A great sadness settles on me; it's almost like leaving my own home. I haven't had such a strong feeling of place for years.

They say the future is impossible to predict. But when I am in the clubs with young men like Cliff and Dafydd, with their intense 'provincial' love of the valleys and villages, and for the previous generations who fought through in impossibly bad times—I feel a crazy optimism for Britain.

The clubs *are* backward looking. How can it be otherwise when so often the members' great-great-grandfathers lived just round the corner? Working men's clubs are repositories of myth and tradition, where conformity and eccentricity run easily in tandem. Theirs is a unique, not always attractive, but real grass roots democracy—and it works. No one knows quite why or how. One thing I know: the past that the clubs preserve, so lovingly and at times so comically, is not something dead and constricting. It seems to hold a promise. □

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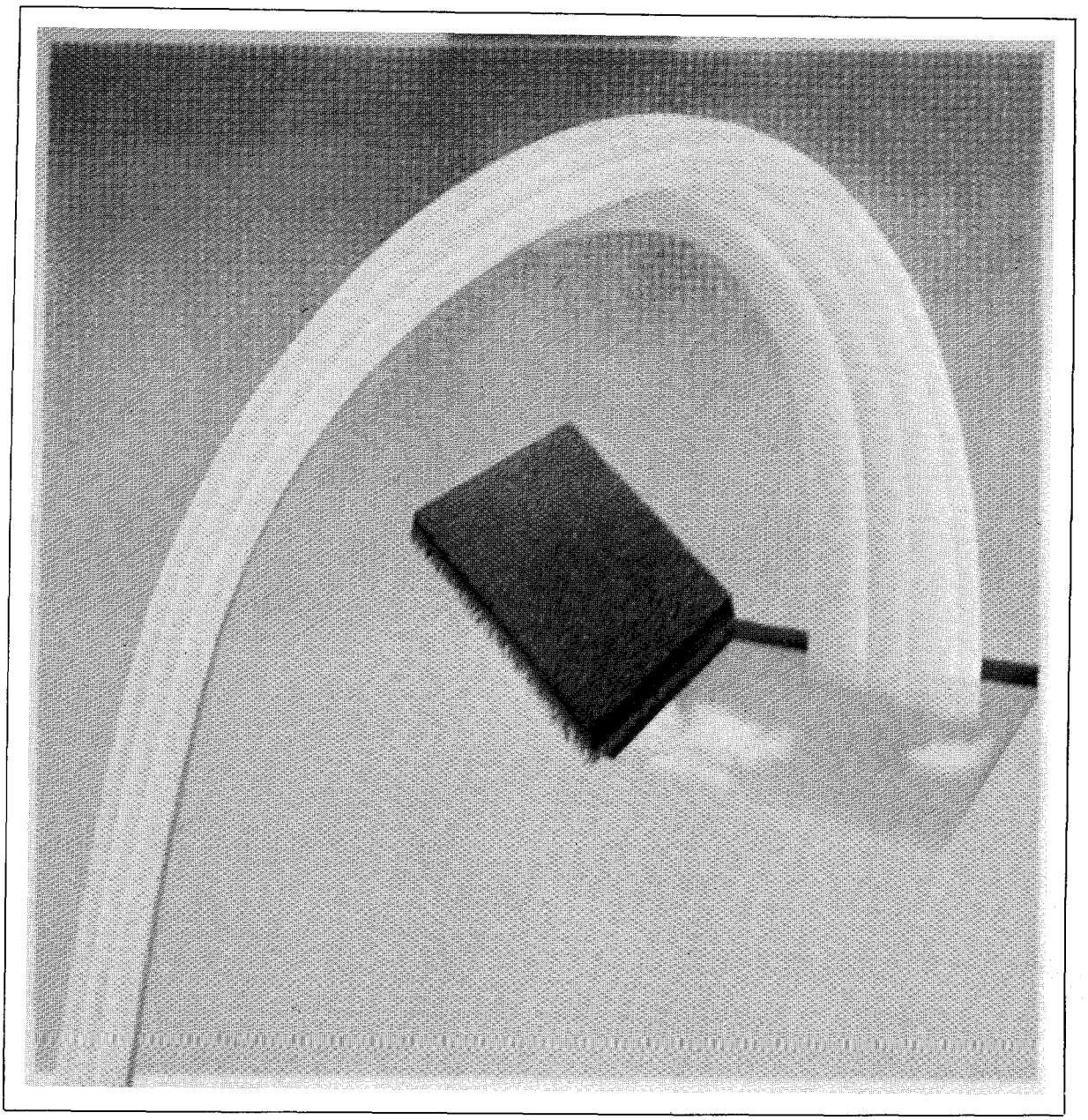

WILLIAM E. WILSON

SOUVENIR OF VICTORIA

After dinner, I went out on the veranda of the Empress Hotel to wait for Hana.

The night had come while we were in the dining room and from the veranda I saw for the first time that an over-inventive Chamber of Commerce had strung lights on the walls, the towers, and the doors and windows of the Parliament Buildings beyond the inner harbor. The lights illuminated nothing and looked like perforations in the sky. "Souvenir of Victoria," I said to myself. "Cut along dotted lines. . . ."

"Decadent!"

I was startled. A woman in front of me at the edge of the porch turned as she spoke, and with the glow from the inner harbor at her back I could not see her face.

"Decadent. . . ," I said, repeating the word after her, testing it.

I should never have used her word in that context myself, but she had given me what I had been seeking ever since our arrival in Victoria that afternoon. *Le mot juste* they used to call it in literary circles in the days before *le mot juste* and literary circles themselves became decadent.

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Her word for the tenebrific lights on the Parliament Buildings was the word for Victoria itself. Victoria, British Columbia, I decided, exhibited signs of decline and decay and a tendency toward over-refinement of style.

"Vulgar," the woman said. "Yes?"

She had a foreign accent.

"I liked your first word better," I said. "It is more original. And more comprehensive. It describes the whole package." I was thinking of the carefully nurtured flowers of Victoria, the studied quaintness and the throngs of tourists, especially the sleekly tattered young people asleep or playing guitars half naked on the grass plots that bordered the quay. I had given the shopworn word "package" the tone of contempt it deserved. "This town is a cenotaph, an empty tomb, dedicated to a British colonialism that vanished years ago. And now those lights yet, to make its Parliament Buildings a two-dimensional outline of nothing!" My stomach was reminding me of the Brussels sprouts served with my *caneton à l'orange* in the dining room, and I added, "Even their diet is decadent!"

I had let myself be carried away. Or was it that the woman simply did not understand? She moved off into the dark without another word. A moment later, I saw her pass Hana in the doorway, going into the lobby as Hana came out, and only then I saw her face and recognized her.

Hana responded to the lights with a little gasp.

"Your friend thinks they are decadent," I said.

"My friend—?"

"The Grosbeak's lady."

"You have met them? They spoke to you?"

"She was alone. She has an accent. I think she is Czech."

The accent had resembled Hana's, but it was more pronounced. Hana left Czechoslovakia a long time ago and she has an English education.

"I can not believe it, that she is Czech!"

Hana is a patriot and wishes all Czechs to be likable.

"I'm not good at accents," I said. "She could be Polish, or Russian."

Hana made a face at my teasing and changed the subject. Our room was going to be noisy, she said. It was above the taxi stand and the porte-cochère where the sightseeing buses loaded. "With no air-conditioning it will be too warm with the windows closed," she said.

I told her that I would try to change the room but doubted that I could; the hotel seemed to be full.

She had dropped the subject of the Grosbeak and his lady and would probably never have given them another thought if it had not been for me. With me, everything is more black or white than it is with Hana—especially black. Already I had made up my mind that the Grosbeak was a fathead, a horse's ass. It was my encounter with him when we got off the bus from Vancouver that afternoon that had set me upon the quest for a denigrating word for Victoria.

That is my way. I have strong first impressions. I bear grudges. I imagine things. I am paranoid about places as well as people. For example, I have never liked Milan because the first time I was there I almost came to blows with the dishonest taxi driver who took me to my hotel. London I have forgiven and learned to love, but it was on my blacklist for a long time after my first visit, when the Tavistock Hotel, without consulting me, moved my unpacked belongings from one room to another while I was out sightseeing. They lost one of my wife's shoes in the operation. Iowa City, Iowa, is another example; for all I know, it may be the most delightful town in America, but I have had no desire to return there ever since a travel agent sold me a ticket on a non-existent airline and I arrived at three in the morning on a bus.

Before we got off our bus in Victoria that afternoon nothing forewarned me about the town Hana and I had chosen for a week of our unescorted tour of western Canada. Certainly there was nothing "decadent" about the two-hour ferry ride we had just taken from Vancouver across the Georgia Strait. That voyage was the "stunning panorama" it was advertised to be, one verdant island after another gliding past. Ominous the blue water may have been, deep and so dangerously cold in that autumn season that no swimmer could survive in it for long, but at the time I found it only beautiful. So too the shallow green water that spread among some of the islands, treacherous in a different way, but magically lovely. All was a vast solitude in the Strait, awesome, mysterious, sometimes hallucinatory, and yet benevolent with a snow-crowned mountain peak miraculously afloat in a southern sky like a pillar of cloud by day. There was no one on deck to identify the mountain for us, the other passengers seeming all to be either Germans or Japanese and no members of the crew ever in evidence where we could question them.

As soon as we got off the bus at its terminal in a corner of the Empress grounds, the unwary calm into which the ferry ride had lulled me vanished and I had a premonition that I was not going to like the island town of Victoria. It came to me when I saw a woman trying to talk into a telephone on the loading platform against the roar and rattle of a dozen diesel engines while a man to whom she obviously belonged waited at her elbow, impatient and sullen and yet detached, as if he preferred not to be identified as belonging to her.

The woman was the woman I would encounter again that night on the veranda of the hotel, a woman in her early forties, blonde, very pretty, with a troubled look in her blue eyes that I was sure was not caused entirely by her difficulty with the telephone, a woman not stout but sturdy, an athlete maybe—a skier, a horsewoman?—strengthened by both time and adversity. She looked as if she needed someone desperately and, at the same time, as if she were fully capable of taking care of herself.

I took a liking to her at once.

But not to the man.

Him I disliked and labeled promptly "the Grosbeak," which is what Hana and I called him thereafter, although I was soon to learn his name.

Dr. Wheelwright Goodrick, Squadron Leader, R.A.F. (Ret'd), M.S., F.R.C.S., London, England.

Believe it or not, that is what the fellow wrote when he registered at the Empress Hotel desk just ahead of me a few minutes later. I copied it off on the back of an envelope for Hana to see. "Yes; they do that sometimes," she said when I showed it to her. Having lived among the

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English, she is not so readily astonished by them as I am. The Grosbeak, however, looked like a man who might sign his name that way in a hotel no matter where he came from.

He was an outsized man, tall and broad, obviously corseted against rotundity, but muscular, one of those big men you expect to wheeze and burble when they speak, although whether he did or not I was never to learn; I never heard him speak once in the week we were at the hotel. His hair was as black as anthracite, dyed no doubt, considering that he had to be in his sixties, and his skin was as white as a fine waxed paper, rendering the blackened hair even blacker. Under a big nose he wore a thread of moustache, also blackened, intended to minimize the grosbeak effect probably but only accentuating it. I was willing to grant him the rank of squadron leader, and those initials after his name too might be genuine; but I still would not have trusted him with a woman, a horse, or a dog worthy of respect—nor with a splinter in my finger, in spite of that "*F.R.C.S.,*" which qualified him for surgery. He struck me as a man not much interested in women, although I would have bet that he had been giving the woman at the telephone a hard time for many years.

She left the telephone finally with a little gesture of failure and despair, and after she and the man moved away from it and I saw the sign above it that read *EMPRESS HOTEL DESK,* I took a try at it myself. To my surprise the telephone gave me no trouble; a Canadian voice promptly assured me that a porter would appear in "aboat" five minutes to carry our baggage up to the hotel.

When the porter came, the Grosbeak and his lady had done nothing further about their own situation and were standing ineffectually beside the general heap of baggage from the bus. The woman had her back to me; the man stood staring above her head at nothing. After the porter put our two bags and Hana's overnight case on his dolly, I took pity on the couple—or, more accurately, on the woman—and invited them to share our porter with us.

Neither of them spoke. The woman turned and looked as if she wanted to speak but was afraid to; the Grosbeak only stared. But in the next moment he was autocratically pointing out for the porter the luggage that was theirs in the accumulation from the disemboweling of the bus.

I had not bargained for the amount they had with them: four oversized, old-fashioned leather suitcases, a woman's bag, and an enormous canvas anomaly that was strapped with leather belts and looked as if it might be a complete set of camping equipment wrapped in a tent. I should not have been surprised by a rattle of pots and pans when the porter heaved it to the top of his dolly. When I saw what was coming, I snatched Hana's traveling case from the truck, but our two bags got flattened at the bottom of the load.

The four of us followed the porter up a path beside a garden of big yellow, white and red roses, which the Grosbeak ignored as he pushed ahead of us with the woman on his arm. Beyond the rosegarden we crossed a parking area to an entrance under a porte-cochère. There the porter, a slight young man, was stopped by a low stone step up to the level of the lobby. All his tugging and pushing and attempts to lift the wheels of his dolly were to no avail.

I moved around the Grosbeak, who was blocking my way, and myself tried to raise the small wheels over the obstruction while the young man pulled. But the load was too heavy for me. I could not get the wheels over the step.

The Grosbeak let me struggle alone for a time, standing by and staring off into space, until finally, with a grunt of impatience and disgust, he shouldered me aside and, with one hand, lifted the dolly and its burden easily—all three or four hundred pounds of it!

My immediate reaction was male anger at being outdone, followed by something like a tremor of fear in the presence of such superhuman strength, and in that moment the boor became for me a brute as well.

Indoors, my impression of the Grosbeak's boorishness was confirmed when, leaving the tipping, if any, to his wife and without a word of thanks for the sharing of the porter, he hurried to get ahead of me in the line at the registration desk. The impression that he was a brute was confirmed when I stood in the line at his broad back. He smelled, faintly, like an animal.

That night in the dining room, the Grosbeak and his lady were placed at a table next to Hana's and mine. In a dinner jacket and starched shirt, the only man in the room dressed so, the Grosbeak faced us. But staring straight at us he did not see us. Meantime, the woman huddled over her food apologetically, as if she had been instructed not to acknowledge our presence. By what sign she had got such instructions I could not tell; throughout the meal the Grosbeak ate in silence, as if he were dining alone.

"What a prick!" I said aloud at one point; and Hana said, "What?"

"Nothing," I said. "It's a word men use about men. A Middle English word, probably. I don't know."

"Oh," Hana said. "You are telling me that I must not use it. It is like those others." She gave a little laugh. "I suppose you were thinking about your Grosbeak. He looks horribly uncomfortable, doesn't he? Poor thing!"

Yes, I said, but I was going to quit thinking about him before he spoiled my dinner completely. No, I said, the roast duck was excellent, but I did not care for the vegetables.

"They are sad, aren't they?" Hana said; and when I asked whether she meant the Grosbeaks or the Brussels sprouts and boiled carrots, which she had got also, with broiled salmon, she said, "Both."

"They are both very English," she continued. "Or trying to be. But they aren't successful. They are 'once removed,' as you say in America of distant cousins. The English are often like that when they are away from home. It's too bad. I have known wonderful English people and have eaten wonderful food in England."

We spent the rest of the week in Victoria looking for "wonderful food" and found it only on our last day—in a French restaurant on Humboldt Street opposite the Empress, no farther away than you could throw a waterlogged Brussels sprout.

Meantime, Grosbeak and companion continued to

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take all their meals unadventurously in the hotel. We saw them going into the dining room every night, himself invariably in dinner jacket and starched shirt, the woman a modest female grosbeak in pastel grays and greens. Foraging elsewhere for better food, we were spared the sight of them at table inside the dining room, but sometimes our breakfasts coincided in the coffee shop downstairs. There, I must confess, I took pleasure in watching the skill with which the Grosbeak dissected his kipper while his wife nibbled away at a crumpet.

After that first evening on the porch I had no further contact with either of the Grosbeaks, but Hana met the woman on our second afternoon at the hotel when she braved the shepherded droves of tour-groups that were corralled in the lobby each day for the experience of "high tea." That day I went off shopping on my own along Government Street. Hana told me afterward that she sat beside the Grosbeak's lady in the lobby. The Grosbeak himself was not present.

"She is Czech," Hana said. "From Prague. We had a nice talk."

The woman told Hana she had married the Grosbeak at the time of the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia after the war when he was attached to the British Embassy in Prague.

"Aha!" I said.

"Aha-what?" Hana said.

"Don't you see? The Grosbeak married her to get her out of Czechoslovakia. She probably paid him a fee."

"She didn't say anything like that," Hana said.

"She wouldn't!" I said. "She probably didn't tell you, either, that she was in love with a young man in England and it was he who made the bargain with the Grosbeak. Then, when the Grosbeak got her to England, he refused to keep his bargain and turn her over to her lover. I suspect he murdered the lover to keep her for himself. He would be capable of that. And as a doctor, he has access to all kinds of poisons."

"*Aha!*" Hana said, mocking me. "Only yesterday you told me your Grosbeak hates women."

"Oh, he does!" I assured her. "But that is part of it. He has sadistically enslaved her for some monstrous purpose of his own. Taking advantage of her gratitude for her escape from Prague. . ."

"I can't believe he is as bad as all that."

She gave me a sweet smile.

"But you do have a wonderful time, don't you?" she said. "Making up stories about people, I mean. I almost believe them myself sometimes."

"I am right more often than not," I told her. "This time I know I am right. He has a secret power over her. He is evil."

I did not tell her that I had just then decided that the Grosbeak kept a wife as a screen to conceal his vices from his colleagues and patients in the practice of medicine. A Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I imagined him parading in drag about his home in London, an Eighteenth Century house in Hampstead Heath, filled with Eighteenth Century furniture, and smelling always faintly of Brussels sprouts. He would dress in Eighteenth Century costume. As an English countess. No; as Lady Hamilton. That was it! He loved to play the role of Emma Hamilton and coerced his poor wife into impersonations of Lord Nelson, threatening to maim her with his surgical skills if she did not submit. Cut off her arm he would, so that she would better resemble the "little one-armed adulterer"! Oh, he was a monster!

"Do they have children?" I asked Hana.

"She didn't mention any."

"See!" I said.

Since I had kept my thoughts to myself, she had no notion what she was expected to see, and said, "From here they are going to Hong Kong. They are making a sentimental journey, revisiting scenes of his early life. He was born and grew up here in Victoria."

"That explains why we haven't seen them on any of the sightseeing tours," I said.

We had visited the Provincial Museum and ridden in a retired, red, London doubledecker out to the Butchart Gardens, which were as beautiful as the guidebooks said but decadent in their own way, conceived in regard to flowers on the theory that Flo Ziegfeld had in regard to chorus girls in the 1920s: if one is beautiful, a hundred should be one hundred times as beautiful. I had never before seen a half million begonias in bloom all at once, and I thought they exhibited a tendency toward overrefinement of style. We found the Provincial Museum well worth our visit and we planned to take the ferry across the Juan de Fuca Strait to Port Angeles and back just for the ride, but I refused to enter "Madame Tussaud's" or "Craigdarroch Castle," a monstrosity built by a coal baron for the woman he loved. I came right out and said they were too "decadent" for my tastes, whereupon Hana could not suppress a smile and said, "I think you had a little flirt with that woman that first night on the porch."

I suppose she was right, in a sense. Although I could not see the Grosbeak's lady in the dark we had enjoyed certain vibrations in sharing our disapproval of the lights on the Parliament Buildings. Furthermore, being in love with one beautiful Czech I could not be expected to dismiss entirely from my thoughts another.

I considered explaining this to Hana. It might appeal to her patriotism. But I decided against it.

Instead, I said: "Now I know what the Grosbeaks do with their days in Victoria. While we see the sights, they go each morning to stand in worshipful silence at the fellow's birthplace. Afternoons, they stroll about on the playing fields of his youth where the Battle of Waterloo was won. Evenings, they sit in their room and admire his trophies. That is what he has wrapped up in that canvas. No wonder that poor woman finds this place decadent!"

"Don't you mean the Battle of Britain?" Hana said.

"No," I said. "I mean Waterloo. The Grosbeak may have been in the R.A.F. and given Winnie a leg up in World War Two, but his heart is with Wellington at Waterloo. It was more British, don't you know. No ugly Americans about to bugger things up. And those bloody French put in their place for all time. He thinks he was actually there." I saw the Grosbeak again in drag in his Eighteenth Century home in London and wondered if Wellington had a mistress too, like Lord Nelson. "I do feel sorry for that woman," I said.

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After their tea together, Hana talked with the Grosbeak's lady again briefly on several occasions and grew rather fond of her. Her name was Lida. A pretty name, I thought. She was only eighteen when she married the Grosbeak, she said. But Hana never found out for me what was in that enormous canvas contraption they took with them on their travels. The Grosbeak was not the camper type, and I remained convinced that it contained the trophies of his youth until, one day, it came to me suddenly that the canvas roll contained a body. That was it! Of course! The body of Lida's early lover! Embalmed by the Grosbeak's medical skills! At night he removed it from the canvas and tortured her with it!

From time to time during that week I told myself that I was letting Victoria fall into the category of Milan and London and Iowa City, Iowa, that I should not allow that fellow to get to my imagination the way he had by picking up that damned dolly. But I could not help it. I disliked the Grosbeak; I despised him; and because I had no way of getting at him I was venting my dislike upon Victoria. If I wasn't careful I would spoil our whole vacation, at least my memories of that place. Therefore, I was glad when the day came for us to leave. I wanted to see the last of him.

It was a Saturday; the tourist load was heavy, and the ferry line put a second bus on the run. The Grosbeaks must have arrived at the station late and got on the second bus because they were not on ours. We had seen them with their baggage in the Empress lobby earlier, but we did not see them on the overland part of the trip to the ferry slip north of Victoria. At first, we did not see them on the ferryboat, either. By the time we got off our bus in the hold they had apparently already got off theirs and disappeared somewhere topside. I imagined them having a leisurely lunch in the ferryboat dining room, where the Grosbeak could order Brussels sprouts, while Hana and I ate sandwiches in the snack bar. Or maybe they had hired one of the big boat's private cabins for the trip and were having lunch there in the company of the contents of that canvas contraption.

The voyage back to Vancouver was not the "stunning panorama" that the journey over to Victoria had been the week before, but it was even more awesome and mysterious, and more phantasmagoric, because this time the Georgia Strait was closed in by a fog that drifted and swayed like drapes of ragged gauze dangling from the heavy sky, sometimes obliterating the islands, sometimes bathing them in a bold, refracting luminosity that created illusions. After our lunch the air was too cold and wet for sitting outside, and Hana soon went into the lounge while I took a brisk walk around the maindeck.

It was at the stern that I finally saw the Grosbeak. He was standing alone on the deck below me at the rail above the propellers. From the maindeck I did not recognize him the first time round. The fog almost completely hid his solitary figure then. But the mist was variable, and when I came to the stern the second time there he was, clearly visible and big as life. Bigger, because the eerie light magnified him and gave the illusion that he stood immediately before my eyes, although he must have been at least a hundred yards away. He stood motionless, his back to me, looking down over the rail, his legs wide apart, a figure of self-esteem, of command. Had I never seen him before I might have thought he was the ship's captain inspecting the taffrail log.

I stopped beside a stanchion, where I could make myself invisible if he turned round, and from that vantage point I watched him for a minute or two. But there was no profit in such spying, and I was about to leave my post and continue my walk when the woman Lida appeared on the deck directly below me. That deck was empty except for the two of them as I watched her move toward her husband. The foghorn was not blowing at the moment, but the Grosbeak either failed to hear Lida's footsteps or chose to ignore them. He did not turn around. She walked with a strangely quiet and deliberate gait, and for some reason that I could not explain I remained, frozen in my place, above them.

What happened next must have happened in less than a minute, although it seemed a long time that I stood watching. I could almost feel the intensity of purpose with which Lida crossed the empty deck below me. She never once turned her head or glanced about. Directly behind her husband she stopped, stooped, grasped him quickly round the legs and, straightening up, heaved him over the rail.

There was no sound. The fog was thickening again but the foghorn had not yet renewed its blowing. No startled cry came from the man as he went over the rail, and there was no splash as he struck the water, as he must have done although I could not see his fall. Nor was there any shout of "Man overboard!" from the crew, which had been as invisible on this trip as they were on the other. Nothing in German or Japanese, either. The passengers must all have been inside, out of the wet and cold. Nor in English from myself, who stood, still frozen, beside my stanchion.

Lida looked down over the rail for a few seconds; and then as she turned, unhurried, to walk back across the deck, the fog closed in completely of a sudden and she vanished.

I stared for a moment at the blinding whiteness that made the whole stern of the vessel vanish with her. Finally, I made myself turn and grope my way into the lounge, where Hana was waiting for me.

I was unable to tell her at once what I had seen.

I expected there would be some kind of commotion on the ferryboat, and I waited for that. But there was none. Apparently no one else had seen what happened. I told myself that the woman would have to report her husband missing before we went ashore. She could not simply continue her travels or return to England alone. She would have to explain his disappearance. But nothing happened.

In a short time, the boat was ready to unload at the Vancouver dock. Everyone went below to the buses and cars parked in the hold; and buses and cars drove up the ramp and ashore, one by one; all was orderly and routine. I saw no rushing about of authorities. I did not see Lida.

I began to regret that I had not told Hana at once what I had seen, because the longer I delayed the more difficult

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it became for me to speak. At first, on the boat, I had been in a state of shock. Then I was incredulous. After that, guilt took over. I had watched a murder and done nothing to prevent it. I should have cried, "Stop!" and if the woman had heard me, perhaps she would not have committed the crime. I argued to myself that there had been no time for me to cry out, "Stop!" because I did not know what she intended to do until she had done it. But even after it was done, I did not shout, "Man overboard!" as I should have done, nor report what I had seen to the ferry captain afterwards. I was sure that made me an accessory of some sort.

Hana and I were on our bus. Soon we would arrive at the Vancouver bus station. There we would take a cab to the Canadian Pacific railroad station and board our train for the East. I knew that, instead of catching that train, I must go from the bus station to the police at once and tell them what had happened on the ferryboat.

I began my approach to the subject with Hana indirectly.

"Did you see the Grosbeak's wife get on her bus?" I asked.

"Yes. Didn't you?"

I hoped Hana was going to tell me then that she had seen the woman in custody of the police. But I knew she hadn't; she was too calm.

"She waved to us," Hana said. "I thought you saw them."

"*Them?*" I said.

"Yes. Your Grosbeak was getting on the bus ahead of her. He would, wouldn't he?"

"You saw both of them? You saw him, too?"

"Yes, He was getting on the bus, and I am sure he saw her wave. But of course he paid no attention. I think she did it just to spite him. You know, I believe meeting someone from her native country did her good, gave her a kind of confidence that she needed. I'm beginning to believe some of those things you imagined about your Grosbeak may be true. What was it you called him that first night at dinner?"

"Never mind," I said. "You're sure you saw him, too?"

"But of course. How could I have been mistaken?"

By the time we arrived at the bus station it had begun to rain; but even so, and in spite of Hana's assurances, I tarried at gathering our bags in order to watch the other ferry-bus unload. Finally, I saw Lida get off it, and then Grosbeak—*both* of them.

As we passed them when we left the boarding platform, they were standing ineffectually beside the general heap of baggage from their bus, just as they had done on the Victoria platform a week before. Hana waved, but the woman's back was half-turned to us and either she did not see us or was afraid this time to acknowledge the greeting. As before, in Victoria, the Grosbeak only stared above her head at nothing. The sight of him in living flesh—at least, in his own corseted facsimile thereof—brought me, as I had hoped it would and yet as I had already begun to fear that it might not, some alleviation of my guilt. But not enough. I discovered I could still wish him at the bottom of the Georgia Strait. □

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

DREAMBOOK BESTIARY

1. Fear's Understudy

An armadillo merges with night
like some lost part of a model kit
for Sir Dogma's cracked armor.
It rests against a mossy stone,
a steelgrey safe-deposit box;
groundlevel, two quicksilver eyes
peer out from under a coral helmet
color of fossil. It lives
encased in an asbestos hull,
at the edge of a kingdom
of blackberries in quagmire,
in a grassy daydream,
sucked into its shield
by logic of flesh.

2. Glimpse

Near a spidery cage of grass,
this cripple inches sideways up a sandy trail
with its little confiscated burden.
Just bigger than a man's thumbnail;
light as the shadow of a bone.

The sea falls short again. Claws unfold.
Its body almost creeps out. Morning
ticks away. Playing yes, no,
maybe so, it places its dome-shack
down on the sand & backs off;
surveys it for the first tremor of loss.

3. Underside of Light

Centipede. Tubular, bright egg sac
trailing like a lodestone (unable to say
which is dragging which) out of damp compost:
biological soil, miasma, where lightning
starts like a sharp pain in god's spine.

In its nacreous armor, this sentinel rises
from a vault of double-blackness.
This vegetal love forecasting April;
arthropod crawls toward murdering light:
first thing tied to last.

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LEW MCCREARY

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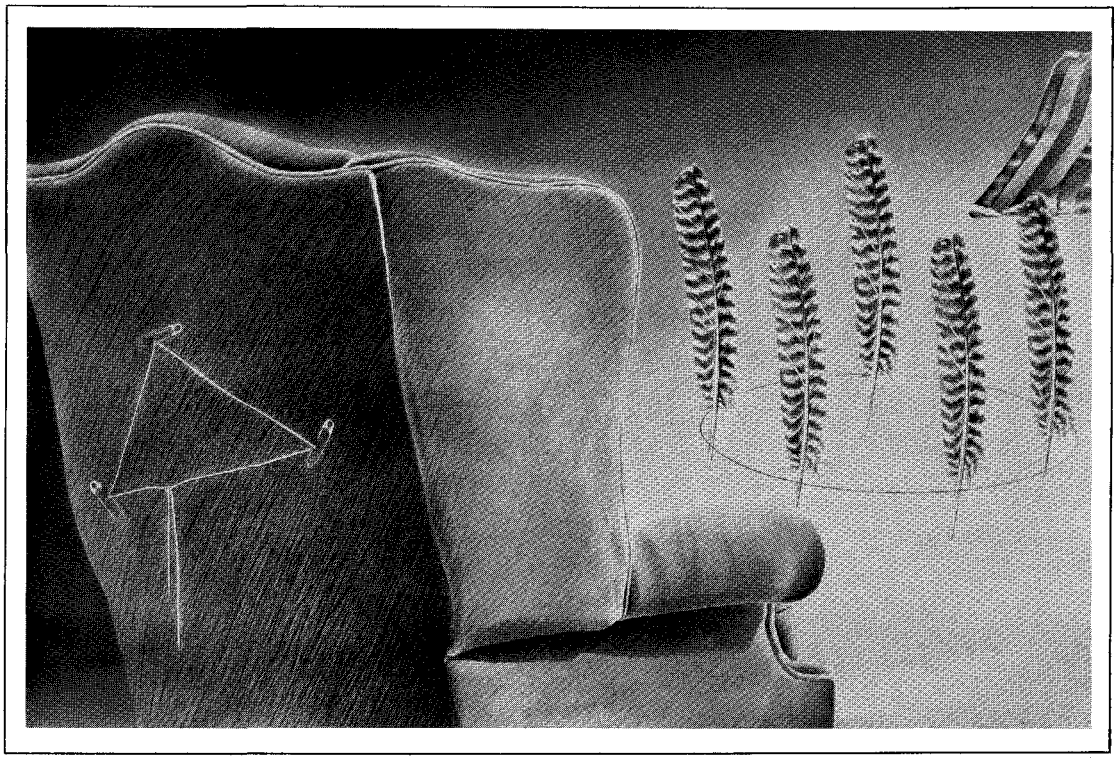

My wife, Joanna, loves her potato chips. I see it coming, what she wants. She will come to want them; the wish will grow inside her. Starting now as she begins to wish. . . Her head turns. She is quiet and dark. The wind blows, the rain slants, a thousand fingernails click lightly at the windows. She will make me want them, too. I don't object, I won't object. I will get them for her. In for a penny, in for a pound. Potato chips. We are together.

On Saturday afternoon we sit by ourselves in the apartment. The rooms are daylight dark, the sausage odor clings to the cool walls. The clock ticks and we rattle the thin sections of the Saturday paper.

There is a game on. I would like to watch the game, but I'm thinking I won't. I have to think about it. Joanna will not join me. She also hates to be in the other room hearing the sudden cheering sounds that swell around the corners. And she hates the voices of the announcers, so clean and untroubled. So smooth, she says. "They all sound like Dean Martin to me." She tells me the less I watch, the less I'll want to watch. And it's true: the collisions are all the same, loud and cracking, and now I've begun to worry about the players being hurt. Even the announcers admit they worry. The game is changing. Pain is the hero, Joanna says. But she believes me when I tell her it used to be better. "I played it. I loved it. I never once got hurt."

We don't have any children yet. We have our jobs. Joanna works at the library, I work at the paint and sealant factory. We bust through the week like a locked door and find ourselves in the white empty space of Saturday, skidding toward a far wall. We are like paper snakes sprung from a can. Without speaking about it we can feel it grow up between us that we are inside all alone and everything else outside is strange.

Joanna stands and goes to the window. She walks, slow, looking like lagging her ankles behind her. Her head drifts off to one side and her neck cracks twice like a fresh apple. We live high up in the attic of her father's house. We can't look out the windows without crouching. Phil and his wife, my wife's stepmother, talk from room to room below. When we are here, we walk all day on their voices. We pay a small rent. Joanna crouches. She tells me Mr. Mulhouser has his special lamp lighted.

We can look down into Mr. Mulhouser's parlor across the street. He has a picture window. Looking one Sunday morning, we discovered his wife, Ilse, dead on the floor from her second stroke. Mr. Mulhouser was at the stadium at the time, dusting seats before the game. He was an usher. He had to be called away. When he walked up the walk, he still had his uniform on, his blue cap with its red brim and gold braid. He still had his dusting rag.

LEW McCREARY lives in Massachusetts. He is working on a novel, an excerpt from which appeared in Ploughshares.

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The ambulance attendants thought he was from one of the other ambulance companies. They shook their heads at him. He shook his head back. They finally figured it out. They revealed his wife to him. He spoke to the stretcher softly in German. The neighborhood stood together quietly on the other side of his hedges. He refused invitations to dinner; he refused to have someone come into his house and cook for him or sit with him. He said he would go up to the corner for a fish sandwich. He did that later on. The neighborhood watched his slow march. It was a symbolic event, and we all witnessed it from behind our windows. He came back after a while with a pure white bag from the bakery. His dessert on the day when his wife died. No one knew what it was. Joanna said strudel, but she was only guessing.

Mr. Mulhouser's lamp depicts the great Chicago fire on its shade. The heat of the bulbs rotates an inner shade with slits in it which make the flames on the outer shade flicker. Sometimes at night Joanna kneels by the window in the dark and watches Mr. Mulhouser's lamp. It decorates the view. She stares and says it makes her calm. The lamp is an old continuing memory.

Joanna and her younger brother had a good relationship with Mr. Mulhouser. When they were children he would invite them inside his house to see the lamp up close, how the two shades worked together. She and her brother would sit and watch, their wide faces flickering, the old parlor glowing orange around them. When Mrs. Mulhouser ran the vacuum-cleaner, the lamp flickered even more and Chicago burned hotter. That's what Joanna tells me. Every Christmas he would come across the street with a box of butter cookies decorated with sugar things that looked like ball bearings. Joanna's mother always gave one to the dog first. She hated Germans. Joanna's father finally divorced her. The dog and Joanna's brother went to live with her.

Before he worked at the stadium, Mr. Mulhouser (like me and like Joanna's father, Phil) worked with asbestos. A lot of the neighborhood does. It's easy; we can walk to work. The plant makes paints and caulks and sealants. I'm in shipping and receiving. I drive a fork-lift in and out the backs of plywood-smelling tractor-trailers.

When Joanna gets a craving for something, I can see it in her eyes. . . They soften like old grapes; they get a watery film and the light goes dark behind them. She is empty feeling. The steadfast beacon of Mr. Mulhouser's lamp is not enough to fill the space. She looks away from the window, brings her eyes back in from the fibrous rain. She smiles (half sadly, half wickedly) in her weakness. The walls of the angular attic shrug around the two of us. She says, "Larry, I feel like potato chips. Wouldn't you like some potato chips?" The afternoon, the Saturday, our silent down-time tattering in the rain. We need a dog, we need a child. What future is inside us? I think we're waiting to see what happens.

I get my slicker. She says she'll take a shower while I'm gone. The rain strikes the copper flashing around the gables. The motor that makes the television antenna rotate groans. Phil is downstairs watching the game. We make a list.

"Potato chips," I say, "and I need some cigarettes, too."

"And gum," says Joanna, "the red kind."

"Milk and Ovaltine," I mumble, "and more chili powder."

"English muffins," says Joanna. "Onions. And plastic garbage bags, the name brand kind. The others are too thin. They rip."

"What else?"

"Nothing," she says. "But play a number." I write the number down, Joanna's age, my old football jersey: *2554*.

The antenna rumbles. Phil is flipping channels. Joanna stares up through the roof. It seems to shake. She takes a few steps backwards and leans her head against the ceiling where it slants down into the wall. She opens her mouth and says Aahhh like a patient; the sound comes groaning out, agitated by the rumbling of the motor on the antenna. Her mouth snaps shut and her eyes close. Phil is in secret touch with his daughter.

Something about the supermarket that always bothered me is that the IN and OUT doors are reversed, IN on the left, OUT on the right, like English driving. Why? It can't be unintentional. They must be setting us up for something. . . Throw us off guard, force an adjustment, make us do things their way. How many times have I nearly gone through the OUT door on my way IN, leaping back like a fool to keep from being hit in the mouth by the hissing thing opening out. Someone is on the other side stepping on the rubber mat, her face concealed behind bags topped with bread and paper towels. At the supermarket, conditions turn us all against each other.

Once inside I go straight to the aisle. Other shoppers rattle past the snacks, park their carts and return to graze. I don't look at anyone else's face; I look only at the things that are here. We are all ashamed, crouching and feeling, taking the bags and shaking the dry contents or holding them still and staring at them, trying to decide. Ripples, curls, shapes and flavors, colors: packages of pleasure.

The bags are made of substances like Impervulon. Sunlight can't penetrate. You can see your reflection, a dozen swollen images of yourself getting ready to choose. Some of the bags are inflated, bloaters, something pumped inside that gives a shape. This is new. I take a bag and hold it; it has sides. . .

I think of work. A boxcar slides up the siding full of asbestos bags that are not palletized. I have to bring pallets and stack the bags one by one, four bags to a course, six courses high each pallet. The bags are big. It takes a lot of fiber to make fifty pounds. The fiber flies. The bags are like pillows blown full of dust. They are firm, solid, rectangular. Where your fingers compress the bags, their contents squeak. I hear a hissing from the potato chips. I am squeezing out the air. Rain wraps the supermarket; it drools around the banners in the windows.

Joanna eats them fast. I only eat one to her every two. We drink some beer. In the middle of the room we crunch, sitting on the floor. The bag lies in front of us, gaping like a whale as we reach inside. The chips are brownish,

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lightly burned the way Joanna likes them. I am the hero; I brought this goodness home. She smiles and rubs my shoulders.

Joanna isn't overweight, she is thin. Nothing she eats shows up on her figure, only in a temporary paleness that sometimes settles in her face. She has such a fast system, she says. It turns everything to dust. I think of the loud machine that sits in the street and chews up tree trimmings. Phil is as thin as his daughter, but never as hungry.

After an hour she says, "O God, I feel sick! Do you feel sick?" I tell her I do, but I really don't. We look up the movies on tv. We get into bed and watch "No Highway in the Sky." A scientist played by Jimmy Stewart fears that structural weaknesses will make the tail fall off a certain kind of airplane after a certain number of flying hours. Planes are crashing, but no one believes him. The airlines will not ground the planes.

Downstairs Phil keeps changing the antenna. Stewart scribbles math equations. Sophisticated test machinery pounds at a full-scale mock-up. As the tail section vibrates more and more, the picture goes from bad to worse until Phil apparently decides to watch the movie too. We finish in the clear. The predicted failure does not occur at the predicted time. Stewart wrings his hands; something must be wrong with his calculations. The manufacturer gloats.

But suddenly, finally, the tail section separates from the fuselage with a jagged shriek. Stewart rushes through his math again; he forgot to figure in the effects of colder temperatures at higher altitudes. But he was right all along: something *was* wrong. The tail *did* fall off. At the end of the movie he falls in love with Glynis Johns. And Joanna falls asleep. She heats up like a radiator and I wonder does she have a fever. Her stomach rumbles violently as afternoon turns into evening. The empty bag of potato chips lies at the foot of the bed like an exhausted pet. The rain begins to taper off.

Joanna reads everything she can get her hands on about asbestos. She writes to societies and health organizations for printed matter. She brings home books and magazines from the library. Phil has seen the doctor twice this month. He jokes about it. They stick a scuba hose in his mouth and tell him to blow. He says he thinks they're trying to cure his bad breath. But his eyes are little and black like tarnished BB's. He's going down by his eyes. No one knows. Dogs are starting to bark at him. He always liked dogs and they always liked him.

Joanna stops in to visit with him evenings. He coughs for her. I think he does it to make her angry. She wants him to quit his job. She wants him to see a specialist other than the doctors the company sends him to. He won't stop joking about it and he won't stop going to work.

"I'll quit when there's blood," he says. He nods across the room to Lucia, his wife. She smiles carelessly. She is gluing colored sands to panes of glass, making pictures as gifts for Christmas. Phil will make the frames.

"It's up to Phil, dear," Lucia says. She is working away on a white moon in a red sky. Joanna flinches as Phil coughs. He can make his windpipe sound like a car spinning its wheels on a patch of ice.

Joanna comes upstairs angry. "He watches too much television," she says. "He's such a tough-guy." She and Phil have always been close. She thinks about him as much as she thinks about me. It's part of our being up here above him. She keeps her daughter relationship, and I'm stuck between them both. When Phil was divorced, Joanna was old enough to choose.

His teeth were untended for seven years. Joanna worried. He ached for a year before he went to see a dentist. She said something about it every day. He lost almost everything, all but the lower front. Now he's proud of his new teeth. When Phil smiles, what Joanna sees is the final fruit of her bothering, his smooth perfect denture sunk in the stone of his jaw: permanent. She is tied to his coughing. It comes up through the floor. They are close. It's a good thing I like him so much.

She sweeps a file folder off the kitchen table with the back of her hand. Sheets of type and tissuey diagrams float around. A list of symptoms lands on my right shoe. Number 11 is smoking. Smoking is a symptom. I kick the list in the air. Joanna begs a cigarette and lights it. She launches a cloud of smoke that makes a shaft below the light hanging over the sink. She suddenly turns to me sharply and asks when I'm planning to go back to school. "You are just like him," she says, pointing down at the floor. I freeze her face like a photograph: her eyes are wide, she is beautifully tense and red. Cords rise up in her neck. I shut my eyes and listen to her cooling.

I have seen that Phil doesn't wear his respirator anymore when he's mixing batches of Insulastic sealant. That is strictly against both company and OSHA regulations. There's even a name for what he's doing. Not wearing your respirator is counted as a symptom on the medical checklist. Is that believable? How stupid do they think we are? Like smoking is a symptom. Probably dying is considered a cause. Not wearing your respirator is called "Denial Syndrome," and it usually shows up in younger men than Phil. If an OSHA inspector ever saw him without his mask there'd be some big trouble. And if Joanna ever saw him without it. . .

Joanna is obsessed. It would be one thing if she just wanted to be informed. But she keeps on reading. It affects her. She dreams about things like radiation. Phil claims he hears her at night through the floor. "Can you shut her up, Larry? Jesus, it's too damn quiet on this street. I hear every goddamn sound." But I sleep right on through it, whatever she says or does. She did kiss me once in the middle of the night, and then I woke straight up. But she was asleep again. She had rolled back to wherever.

What is it like to dream about radiation? Joanna says it's warm but scary. She says it tingles. She walks to the back of the house and into a room she never knew was there. The walls are like clear pink jelly and she can see outside. She can hear invisible motors coming closer. Then she gets warm and begins to tingle. She wakes up running away. She crashes into furniture. And that's the part that Phil hears. He describes the sound as being like a siren. "If I wanted to, I couldn't imitate it," he says. "My own daughter."

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"She's only worried," I tell him. "I'll talk to her." But he shakes his head. Nothing, he says, can be done. Nothing can change what happens in a person's dreams. "Leave her alone," he tells me. "She's only sleeping."

Most days I walk to work with Phil. When we go through the gate and under the sign, I notice his face changes: "Urkhardt Paint, Caulk & Sealant . . . Home of Insulastic, The Fireproof Skin That Stretches And Breathes." His face changes and he actually looks better, smoother, and I figure he's got it made for another eight and a half hours. He's like the putty in the tube and takes whatever shape the situation calls for. Past the gate he knows what he needs. I stay on his case about the mask, though. One day he told me he couldn't breathe inside it anymore. I told him, "Here, let me have a look at it once. . ." And he jerked it away. He was hot-eyed, as angry as a little kid.

He's in charge of a whole corner of the second floor at the plant. He works alone at three mixers. He says he doesn't need a helper and doesn't want one. He drove a kid crazy that they gave him once. But he's always been skilled enough to time things right. They leave him be. Realistically, he can do what he wants as long as the batches keep coming. He makes two kinds of sealant and one kind of caulk. He's a model of steadiness.

But one of these days I'm afraid he'll start to cough real bad, and then there's the chance he'll fall right into a mixer. According to Joanna, after all these years Phil's body is so saturated with ingredients that even a chemist might not know there was something foreign in the batch. He'd come out just as silvery and smooth, and spread like cream across the yet uncladded tops of trailers and campers . . . just like icing.

In truth, I think if he could figure out a way to get his disability pay, then he would probably quit. But he knows there'd be a challenge and a hearing. There would just about have to be. It's nothing personal. But if Phil got it without a struggle, too many more would be encouraged. Everyone who works here breathes the air. It seems so cut and dried. But there have to be obstacles.

The lawyers are mysterious. It has happened before: a case drags on for years if it has to. The process is difficult to follow. The lawyers smile each other up and down; they have lunch together. They laugh when they win and they laugh when they lose. Phil says you can never get a solid fix on where the matter rests. The case turns into paper after a while and the claimant sort of disappears. Phil says that worries him most, it worries everyone most: as the time passes, you begin to forget you've got it coming, you forget they owe it to you. And finally one day a new attorney for the company appears in court and asks you, "Did you wear your respirator at all times? Or is it true that on numerous occasions when it was required, you failed to wear it?"

"Hell," says Phil, "I worked with that shit twenty years before I even knew what a respirator was! So where was OSHA then?" His hard pupils shake in their sockets.

He makes the same points over and over again, hearing himself go on all the time for all these years. Sometimes he looks as crazy as the other old guys. Their hairlines recede exactly the same, revealing pale patches of freckled skin sitting like milky ponds above the temples. Phil has a rash on his left side and a swelling in front of his ear, beneath his sideburn. A big red bump. I catch him working his jaw back and forth to test what it feels like. When he knows I'm watching he won't look up. I think he's afraid he can't keep his face together. Lunch is hardest for him. It breaks his rhythm, it makes him stop. He sits with his paper bag in his lap and opens the top and looks down inside; then he closes it up again. You'd think he wanted it all to disappear without him having to eat it. Finally he reaches in and tosses me a plastic bag of grapes.

"Think fast!" he says. The bag has his dusty white fingerprints. He goes back to work before he has to.

There's a big fat hillbilly guy named Willie who spends his lunch-break in the crapper smoking Kools without filters. Willie is huge. He has a goiter and only half his teeth. He says he smokes five packs a day, even though he works in an area where he's not allowed to smoke. So he uses lunch to catch up. You'd have to see it to believe it. He sits on the throne in a stall with the door open. His forehead strains and a dusty orange coal glows hot in front of his tight lips. He has the next one ready in his hand. His goiter shakes like a dewlap.

Once or twice a month, Willie clogs the toilet with butts. Akerson, the plant manager, sends for a maintenance guy to snake it free. Willie moves out of the way like a guilty mountain. He hangs his head but he keeps his lighter going. Akerson grabs the old coffee can from on top of Willie's locker and begins to scream: "In HERE, Willie! They belong in HERE!" He waves the can in Willie's face. Willie nods. Phil stands outside the door rubbing the back of his neck and staring hard at Willie. Finally he turns away and shuffles past me.

"Stupid sorry son of a bitch," he says and begins to cough. I hear the whine of the snake and then the toilet flushes. Phil takes the afternoon off and goes to see the doctor again.

I come home from work one day to find that Joanna has gotten herself in a state. She has put all my work clothes outside the door bundled up in a plastic garbage bag. On top of the bag she has left the newspaper, open to the page that did it: "Daughter's Disease is Dad's Doing." A thirty-one year old non-smoking woman has contracted lung cancer. Doctors believe she got it from breathing asbestos fibers her father brought home from work every day in his clothing.

"I can still see him shaking out his jacket," the woman is quoted as saying. "I remember the white dust flying around the house like snow."

Joanna is inside vacuuming the walls, the ceiling, the curtains, the closet, the clothing. She stands in the middle of the bedroom. I'm afraid to look at her. Her face is flushed and the vacuum-cleaner whines. She flings out her arm and points at me, my shirt, my pants, my hair. . . She jabs at the air. I take a step into the room and she screams, "NO!" She throws me a bathrobe. I undress on

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the landing outside the door. Downstairs I hear Phil and Lucia hollering from room to room. Phil's voice is loud enough, but thin, and Lucia pauses after everything he says.

The vacuum-cleaner runs for hours. Even after she's done everything twice, she leaves it running to clean the air. I finally convince her to let me shut it off to keep it from burning out. In the instant motorless silence, Joanna begins to laugh. I go to hold her. She laughs and we rock together. She laughs and sucks air and shakes her head and admits how crazy she is. We argue the point, but I'm not laughing with her or at her. I'm just as scared as she is, probably, and the quiet apartment suddenly seems unsafe and hollow. The blood runs louder and harder, and my ears pop. I am just about ready to turn the vacuum-cleaner back on again. A jet goes over and fills the house with a sound like mush.

Christmas brings terrible news. We are all on edge in Phil's house. The weather has been weirdly warm; all of the windows are opened a crack. Squirrels still run in the leafy gutters, chattering after forage. These things add up. In places like Minnesota, it's been freezing since September. But Lucia still has Chinese cabbage growing in the garden out back.

("Nice and crinkly," Lucia says, coming in with her sleeves rolled up.)

Many evenings Lucia babysits around the neighborhood, but not on the night before Christmas Eve when Phil finally makes his diagnosis official: he's going to die. He sits us down on the sofa and tells us straight out, standing over us with his attitude of seniority. "I wanted to get this out of the way because I knew I couldn't keep it secret. And I'd like to enjoy the holidays."

Joanna begins to shake; she buries her fists between her thighs. The Exxon Chorus is singing carols and the tree is blinking. An electric angel turns at the top the way the antenna turns on the roof. Phil is so calm we can hardly believe it (it turns out later he's taking barbiturates). Lucia drops sugar lumps in her coffee. She already knew. She has that look.

Phil puts a cassette that the doctor gave him on a tape machine and plays it. "This explains the medical part," he says. "They give it to you in case you forget anything the doctor says. Otherwise, I guess you're always calling up." The doctor speaks frankly and precisely, plotting out the illness. His voice is clear and fresh. Joanna stares at the presents under the tree. Lucia unwraps a tangerine. Her knuckles are white and her nails are red. Phil listens like someone waiting for a sound in the night to be repeated. At the end of the tape he says, "Well, okay. Okay then. Thank you, Doctor." The doctor clears his throat and, soon after that, someone sighs heavily, Phil or the doctor. The sigh turns into the dead hiss of blank recording tape.

"I think," says Lucia, "it's nice that they let you keep the tape." Slowly she begins to weep. Her shoulders lift and lower like gills. I've never seen it. Joanna runs into the kitchen; she skids on a throw rug and almost falls. Snickers the cat runs after her.

"Jesus, Phil," I say, which is all I can think of.

"What am I gonna do?" asks Phil. I shake my head. Lucia goes to comfort Joanna, who doesn't like her. I should probably go to intervene, but I don't.

"Honest to God," says Phil, "I feel pretty good right now. Even though I believe that doctor, I still think the son of a bitch is wrong. You know?"

"Well, sure. . .," I say. The Christmas music swells and I feel sick. *O, little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.* The boy sopranos sound like something strained through cheesecloth. When I was a kid I sang in the choir. They tell you to keep your mouth like a room and the song will burst out of your lips like children running out of doors. Phil stands with his hand on top of the television and stares at the top of the tree. Gears in the motor mesh and bind and free themselves; the golden angel groans.

"Oh, fuck," says Phil. He waits for me to get to him. Joanna howls in the kitchen. She makes the painful sound of someone who has failed at something. Phil shakes and the shaking goes right through me.

Joanna keeps her silence for the next 24 hours or so. But I don't believe she is angry or in shock. She knows how to heal herself. She spends a lot of time in the bathtub. The energy fields flow out of her. Steam squeezes from under the door. I station myself in a chair outside the bathroom. I listen and wait. I read. She lets some water out and adds more hot. Over and over. She splashes and hums. I play some records, party tunes. Springsteen . . . the Doobie Brothers. . . *It keeps you runnin', yeah, it keeps you runnin'.*

At the end of the afternoon, I bring her a glass of vodka and ice. She nods. Her skin is splotchy red. She hasn't been soaping herself, only soaking, and her body is magnified in the clear water. Strands of hair have slipped out from under the pins on top of her head. The heat of the water floats them in the air; they rise and fall. Her forehead drips.

I lower the lid of the toilet, sit and keep her company. Steam moves around the room like a sniffing animal. When Joanna sips, the water swishes and ice chinks in her glass. I can also hear Lucia whistling out back in the garden, harvesting Chinese cabbage. I begin to talk to Joanna about all the changes I think we could make. My voice fills the bathroom and spreads itself out through the steam. It sounds so fat and heavy. I say we are going to move to another town. We are going to both get better jobs. We are going to go to school at night. I'll finish my teaching certification and Joanna can study library science. We are going to start eating healthier foods. We are going to save up some money and go on a real vacation. And in a couple of years we are going to have a kid so we can stop dwelling on ourselves so much. There's a lot to think about, things we can do.

Above Joanna's thighs, the empty thick-bottomed glass is bobbing, tilted like a buoy on a breeze. One of her hands is resting on the edge of the tub. Her fingers look pitted and blistered from the water, and the skin is almost transparent.

"You ought to get out of the water," I say. But she's sleeping like a baby, so I pull the plug. The water runs out slowly, making a sucking sound around her heel which partly covers the hole. From out back in the garden, Lucia calls brightly to Phil. □

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DANIEL HALPERN

GELATERIA COLETTI

In the shadow of the duomo of Umbertide, there is a small *gelateria* called Coletti's. Mornings, before the shops close for the afternoon, children of eight or nine, boys and girls, swing around the octagonal church on Vespas into the little square that seats the patrons of the *gelateria*. The foreigners will tell you that it's the best ice in Umbria, and any number of these foreigners can be found at work on the fresh fruit ices in the late morning hours of the weekdays.

During the months of July and August I took my cup of lemon ice and a cappuccino to the farthest table, so I could read the paper and watch, with some detachment, the movement in the square. I have always been able to sit apart and watch the comings and goings of others—not that anything much ever happens; in fact, I count on things occurring only seldom. By sitting apart—by living apart—I have been able to avoid the ennui experienced by others, to be the sole voice and conductor, uninterrupted, of my own. By the second week of my stay the local Italians were used to my presence, and so I escaped their inquisitive staring.

I took a small house in the nearby village of Volpietro—not a village in the way we think of villages in America, but a series of three or four shops with a circle of houses around them. My house belonged to a rather infamous woman from Chicago named Sonia. The area abounded in stories about her conquests, if they could be called that, and they were told with great relish by everyone who knew her. It was the town's ongoing gossip. One story involved a local man, a carpenter, who was doing work on the roof of Sonia's house. He evidently misunderstood her actions, and felt wronged when it became clear to him that Sonia had no intention of marrying him. The carpenter took his case to court, claiming that he had lost a great deal of valuable time tending to this immoral American woman, who had falsely led him on. The judge, after some thought, ruled that Sonia, to compensate the irate carpenter, would have to buy the man a pig. Another story involved a punk rock group called Brutal Apparel who had come to stay with Sonia to "get their heads together." They became one of the great scandals of Umbertide when they turned up on market day in yellow plastic jockstraps and matching cut-off t-shirts. The leader had had a zipper surgically sewn into his chest—I speculated that it was there either to maintain his position as leader of the group, or to keep his friend Sonia out. Eccentrics are a matter of interest to me, and I have given the subject considerable thought. It is my guess that those who live in a constant flurry of the unusual are those who suffer the greatest from stasis, the relative emptiness of

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DANIEL HALPERN is best-known as a poet and editor, though other fiction of his has appeared in Tri-Quarterly.

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the everyday, of the predictable. There is something horrible about this kind of bright showmanship. Brutal Apparel, and most likely Sonia too, were horrible.

I rented Sonia's house for the two months for what seemed from New York City a reasonable price. I arrived by plane in Rome, rented a small Renault, and drove up through the faded hills of Umbria to Umbertide, and then on to the village of Volpietro. My first impression, as I drove up from Rome, was that if this landscape wasn't paradise, it was certainly a fine approximation and I would have no argument with it—the warm wind that kept the olive and cypress trees in motion, the hillcrests lined with trees, the long slopes planted with grape vines—it appeared that peace seemed to have settled in even before I arrived in my rented house.

I planned to see out the summer in relative seclusion, maintaining my lifestyle of enforced solitude, reading nothing more recent than 19th century novels, keeping up a metabolism similar to that of the local residents, which allowed me ample sleep in the afternoon, plenty of local white wine, and my choice of the numerous pastas available in the nearby hill towns. I read up on Cortona and Todi, on Orvieto, Gubbio, Spello and Assisi. I knew where the notable works of art were, the best restaurants, and enough Italian to insure that these things were experienced.

On the second day, I met Caroline, a woman in her mid-forties who had lived for twenty years in Italy, just outside Umbertide and ten minutes from my house. She volunteered to help me with the petty details of setting up life in a foreign country: the hours of the stores, the exchange rate, the best place to buy *spirale* that were so important if one were to have an insect-free night of sleep.

Soon I saw that out of her loneliness she had chosen me to be her summer companion, along with Derek, a local Australian. I am not, by nature, direct; rather, I have always allowed myself to be taken by the elbow, so to speak, and led here and there. Caroline led me here and there. One day she invited me to her house for drinks. She was sitting in her garden with her daughter Fiora, a beautiful little blond girl, eight or nine years old. I was let in by the maid and as I entered the garden I heard Caroline say to Fiora in a calm voice,

"I've told you to stop playing with that bottle. Now you've gone and spilled the wine all over Mommy. Here, how do you like it?"

Caroline lifted a bottle of local rubesco and poured what remained in it over Fiora's head. The gesture was extreme; I might have said something, but there was an expression on Caroline's face that was so detached and cruel that I decided to act as though I hadn't witnessed what had taken place. As Fiora ran screaming into the house, Caroline offered me a bottle of her own house wine, a 1974 vintage that she claimed was made from French *pinot noir* grapes. Caroline was wearing a black sack dress. She was a pseudo peasant, if you know what I mean, with a mistaken British accent that sounded more Australian than English—she had grown up in southern California.

"She's a monstrous little child," Caroline snapped out. "I'm sure she was conceived in Corsica."

As we drank her bottle of corked *vino rosso*, I learned more and more about her bizarre life, as it was viewed through her own eyes. She sat quite close to me as she talked—there was always the faint odor of *spirale* about her—and somehow managed to inch closer and closer without ever appearing to move. She had an amazing knack for such maneuvers.

I also heard stories about the rest of the American and English population. As the sun was going down her Australian friend Derek arrived. He had left the foreign service for the sedentary life of a poet in Umbria, soon switching to serious fiction, and then to the writing of film scripts, for which he apparently had some skill. He had sold two adaptations to a London producer and was working on a third when I met him. He invited Caroline and me, along with ten others, to a lunch at his house in a neighboring village the following afternoon.

We got there in the heat of the day, an hour late because Caroline had insisted on showing me a local vineyard, where we were obliged to taste several vintages of their best wines. The guests were already seated when we walked in. Derek must have been cooking for days; there were at least twenty different dishes, ranging from boiled tongue with the accompanying *salse verde* and a local specialty called *porchetta*, which is roast pork stuffed with fennel and rosemary, to cold boiled potatoes with a *pesto* sauce, curried rice and saffron rice, grilled peppers in olive oil, and tomatoes in an elegantly light but tasty cream sauce. The conversation amounted to nothing, but that might have been because of the extravagance of the meal and the nature of the guests. Most of the meal we ate in silence, and we ate for some time.

I found myself on the terrace sipping an extraordinarily potent grappa with Derek and Caroline, after the other guests had left. We talked about their life in the hills above Umbertide, the pace of that life and the pace of mine in New York—a favorite topic among expatriates who live almost like the natives in the country. Soon the three of us were in Derek's Alfa driving around the mountain to look at houses they knew were for sale.

We looked at several ruins that commanded definitely spectacular views of the Umbrian valleys and hills. I found myself imagining reading in front of a fire during the long winter days, waiting for summer to arrive, and the late mornings, when I would sit with the other foreigners and locals alike—my Italian by then nearly second nature to me—in the chairs outside the Gelateria Coletti.

When I got home that evening I went directly to bed and slept until late the next morning. And then I got up and went in to town to check the mail, send off a few postcards, and have some melon ice at Coletti's. I found Derek and Caroline sitting there when I arrived. Apparently they had decided that I must find a house while I was still in Italy, and plan to spend at least half the year there. They offered to show me a small house on their property which they had recently purchased together. It overlooked a village that had served as a headquarters for the Italian underground during the war. We drove up to see it and I knew immediately that I would make them an offer that day. And indeed I made them an offer, which

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they accepted, and which we celebrated over a very old Chianti in a restaurant in Cortona.

The next day we called to see the local architect and builder, Guido, who went with us up to Monte Falconi to look at the house. Soon we had a workable plan on paper—we would cut out a window in this wall and one in that wall, extend the front room to make a suitable living room, add a staircase at the back of the house for the guest quarters, and so on. For eight million lira, Guido could turn the house into a beautiful *casa colonica*, in which I could live any month of the year. I was so used to being alone that it seemed an obvious place, considering its isolation, to pass the next years of my life. The following days I spent reading up on the area, looking at pictures of houses that had been built in neighboring villages, and examining the rough plans for my house to be.

When I next saw Caroline she was with a Norwegian woman, introduced as Tove, who was staying with her. She was from Trondheim, a city just below the Arctic Circle in the north of Norway. She had straight black hair and pale blue eyes placed strikingly in her pale, round Scandinavian face; the only trouble was that the face refused to engage any significant part of her person. I looked at it, waiting. It occurred to me that she too might be in Volpietro to get her head together. I remember clearly that her hair and eyes were echoed perfectly by the blue linen shirt and black cotton pants she wore. We shook hands briefly; then all three of us sat down in silence. Sitting on my terrace, we drank the local white wine while Caroline and I talked about the financing of the house. We talked, but I think, as I look back, although it was certainly unconscious, that my concern was directed toward seeing that Tove had everything she needed in order to enjoy the afternoon. She didn't speak English particularly well, so that she drifted in the conversation with the result that I was never quite sure whether she was in or out of what was being said. She seemed content just to sit with the late afternoon sun on her face, sipping the cool white wine, looking out over the vineyards that strung the soft, sloping hills below Sonia's house.

Soon the four of us—Derek was never far away—were going everywhere together: to see the Signorellis in the church at Orvieto, the Pieros in Sansepolcro, the Giotto frescoes in Assisi, and to eat in the Ristorante Umbria in Todi with its beautiful view and renowned spaghetti *boscaiola* (made with a cream sauce, eggs and asparagus). Derek and Caroline seemed to have worked out an elaborate way of being together, now that they were partners and whatever else they once may have shared had collapsed. Although she depended heavily on Derek to maintain her daily life, it was apparent that she detested a smugness in him, his minor good looks and vague meanness that usually got no further than badly timed indifference. In many ways, it was a perfect marriage of two savage dispositions. Most of the time they were able to subdue each other, probably out of fear of what the other might say or do; I always had the feeling that they were both capable of any gesture or act, if properly provoked. Caroline would talk to me about Derek if the conversation happened to swing his way, but she never pursued the subject. Actually, she preferred to discuss the perversity of Sonia. It was clear, however, that Caroline had her own fixation on the subject of sex, whether she was talking about Sonia or anyone else. She loved to describe in great detail the very private lives of others, and as I got to know her better, the details became more and more graphic. In her mind I suppose that I was a sort of lover, although whatever intimacies we shared were those of others. This occurs to me now, and it seems almost comic. At the time, the talks about the personal lives of her friends were merely boring, and her habit of getting so close to me as we talked made me physically uncomfortable. My relationship with Caroline, if I can call it that, does not in the least surprise me, as this has been the way I've always led my life—vicariously, from a distance and always safely indirect.

Why did I remain in such close proximity to these people during these months? I believe that it was my last, and perhaps only, attempt to join the society of the world, in a direct way.

Caroline continued to be solicitous toward me. Derek was genuinely puzzled and fascinated by Tove. And Tove and I were caught up in our own internal struggles, although I was able to notice this introversion in her—and I imagine that in her own way she witnessed mine. Perhaps it was not introversion so much as the self-regard one feels is necessary as a newly arrived foreigner in any country. My discussions with Tove were always concerned with the literal and immediate, discussions requiring no speculation or commitment of deep feelings one way or the other.

Although the Italian summer retained a quality of stasis for me, Caroline and Derek seemed to grow more and more irritable. I began to feel that Tove and I were expected to bring to the summer heat, to the long lunches and dinners with too much wine, an energy that would help the other two get through the days.

By mid-August I had tried all the flavors of Coletti's ices, and most of the local wines and pastas. Tove decided she wanted to return to Norway. Both Derek and Caroline were in some way relieved, but I knew that her absence would upset the delicate balance among us all, in spite of the fact that she possessed almost no affect. I was already unable to follow most of what Derek had to say, so full of Derek was most of his conversation, and thus so boring. What annoyed me most was his habit of memorizing some passage of what he had been reading the night before and attempting to fit it in during the course of the day. If it didn't exactly fit—well, never mind, out it came anyway. I once overheard him say to Tove, speaking of Caroline when he first had known her,

"She would dream of delicious dishes served on wonderful plate of soft, whispered nothings, which evoke a sphinx-like smile, while one trifles with the pink flesh of a trout or the wing of a plump pullet."

He delivered this morsel of Maupassant with a splendid wanness, and the words just floated from his mouth. Tove looked at him for a moment with her mouth slightly opened, and then said, "What are you talking about, Derek?" He looked quickly over to me and then back to Tove.

"Caroline was simply the most innocent and lovely

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creature I had ever laid eyes on. Of course, one could say that Americans at heart *are* innocent, you know. But she was exceptionally pure, if you receive my meaning, when she wasn't tarting herself up."

This, naturally, got the necessary rise out of Caroline. They spent the rest of the day not talking to each other. The more I got to know Derek the less I liked him. I must have known by August that I would never live anywhere near him—or Caroline, for that matter. But there were another few weeks to go before I was to leave, and I was certainly going to be the last person to call for a confrontation.

One night before she left Tove came over to say goodbye. We walked up the road leading into the mountains of Volpietro. We said nothing for a long time, and then she took my hand. I felt her vague fingers flutter in my hand, and I wanted them there, although I said nothing. And then I recalled that passage by Maupassant that had been forced on Tove by Derek. How much more accurately it described her than it did Caroline. How much Tove and I were alike. All this came in a moment and was gone, a kind of revelation as we walked into the heavy Umbrian night, with just the hint of a sphinx-like smile on both our faces.

The night was humid from the rain of that afternoon, but her hand was cool and dry. She didn't look at me. She continued up the road, looking ahead, buried somewhere deep inside herself. There was nothing to feel strongly about in Tove; neither was there anything in particular to pity. She was whoever you wanted her to be, and she'd be the last to reject such a notion. We would have talked about her fondly after she had left if any of us could have remembered enough about her.

Derek resented my buying the house in Monte Falconi. It came out subtly in conversation, it came out in his facial expressions, it came out whenever we were together, which was most of the time until Tove left. I'm certain, however, that Derek was unaware of this resentment. I carefully avoided any further discussion about the reconstruction of the house in front of him, although Caroline and I talked about it incessantly when alone. In fact, the house soon became a metaphor for something quite far away, in subject matter, from the house itself, something neither of us wished to acknowledge or pursue, but for quite different reasons.

The month of August seemed endless, full of small events that marked, in a minor way, each day. There was a forest fire that very nearly made it to Volpietro. Then there was the morning we found the scorpions all over Caroline's garage. And one night when it started to rain, bats flew in my window and couldn't find their way back out. Only Coletti's remained unchanged through the unrelenting heat.

"Well," Caroline said one morning near the end of my stay, "when do you plan on giving me a check for the house?"

We were sitting in Coletti's, where I was eating a half-portion of their watermelon ice. I looked up but said nothing.

"I mean it," she continued in her high-pitched, mock-English, "We've spent a great deal of time taking you around, making you feel at home, and not once have you wanted to discuss the money, aside from our first talks. Derek would appreciate having your check in hand by the end of the week."

I was astonished by the crudeness of her tone. It reminded me of how she treated Fiora, and God knows whom else.

"I thought I was to give you the check when I returned to the States," I lied. "If you want it now I'd be glad to give it to you. I'm sorry if Derek is upset."

What I meant to say was that I had no intention of living anywhere near either of them. That must have come across rather clearly, even to those two.

I got out my wallet and wrote a check for the proper amount and handed it to her. I looked into the pale, pink ice in front of me and remembered the color of Tove's eyes. There was silence. And then Caroline got up from the little table and walked into the market—I thought at the time she looked like an overweight young girl in toeshoes in a rundown city gym. I got up after a while and drove back to Volpietro and packed my two small suitcases.

Tonight I am having dinner with Caroline in New York. She called when she got in from Italy last night. Some time has passed since I last saw her walk into the market of Umbertide. She told me Derek had finally persuaded Tove to let him visit her in Trondheim; that lasted a week, and then, shortly after, he moved to Rome, selling his share of their property to the daughter of the woman who owned Coletti's. She smiled as she told me this, but she did not smile with humor. Caroline had married an Italian folksinger and they had been living together with Fiora in one of the condominiums she had constructed in her 14th century village. Her husband was on a roadtrip in the midwest and she wanted to visit a few of her old friends in America. My house was never mentioned.

It doesn't matter to me that I am not a friend of hers. It doesn't matter to me what happened to her or Derek, or, for that matter, what happened to Tove. I haven't thought of them at all these ten years. My life has come to nothing more than it would have had I stayed in the village of Volpietro or moved into the house in Monte Falconi. I am unmarried and I prefer my own company to that of others. I have become more and more direct about this. I spend half the year in New York and half the year in a small house on the southern coast of Portugal. The Portuguese do not make ices as well as the Italians, and there are days during the worst part of the summer, August days, that I think of the ices of the *gelateria* in the shadow of the duomo of Umbertide. But the fish and heavy dark bread, the green wine and port, make up for it. Anyway, I am sitting alone now—Caroline has left and I will not see her again. I understand from her that Tove still visits Volpietro. To be completely honest—direct you might say—I sometimes think about Tove, that if things had been different in my life, if I had been able to say what I thought straight out, if I had known a little more—but why speculate? It is enough to witness and be part of things from a distance. Nothing needs to happen. Nothing ever needs to happen. □

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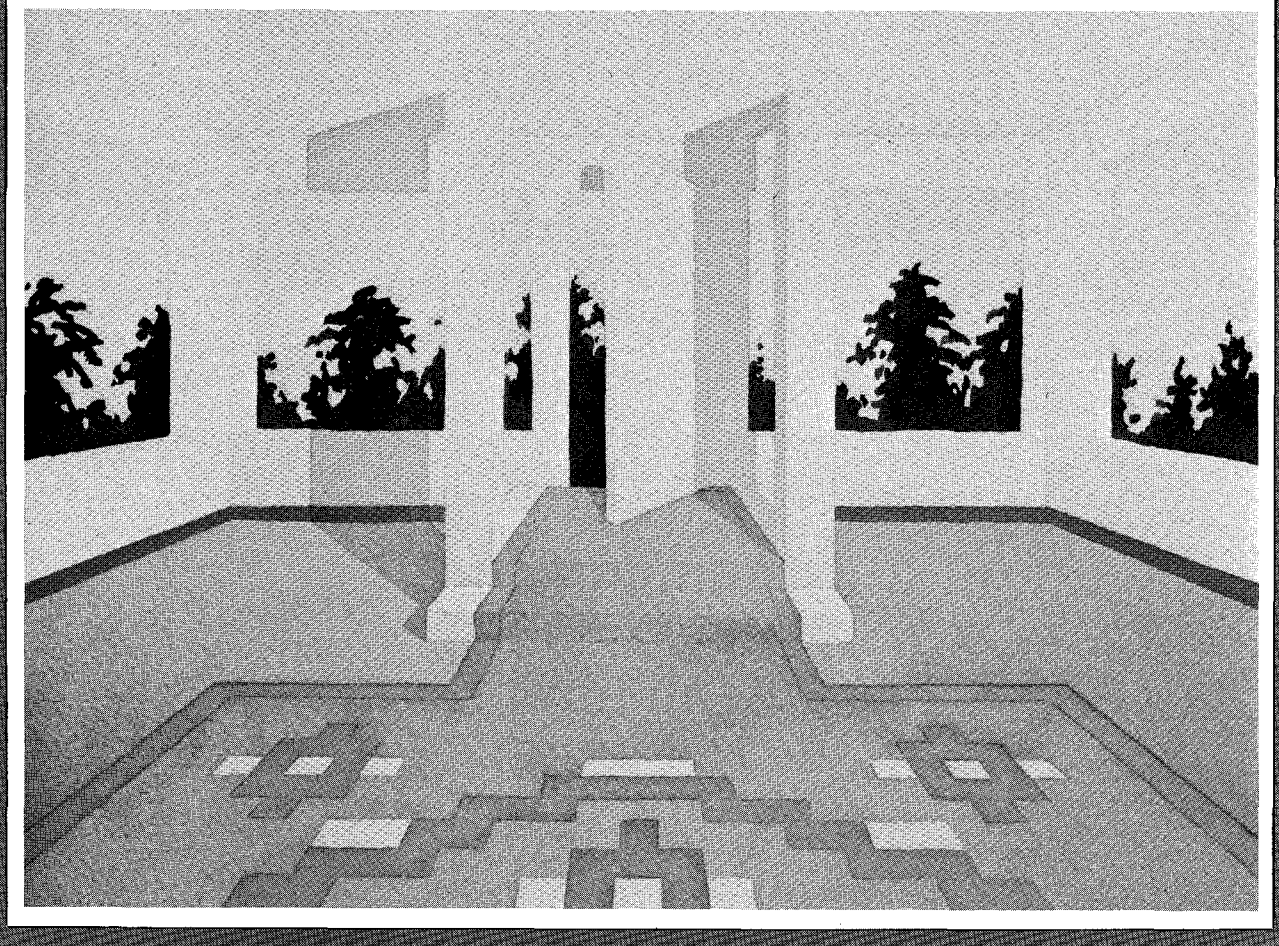

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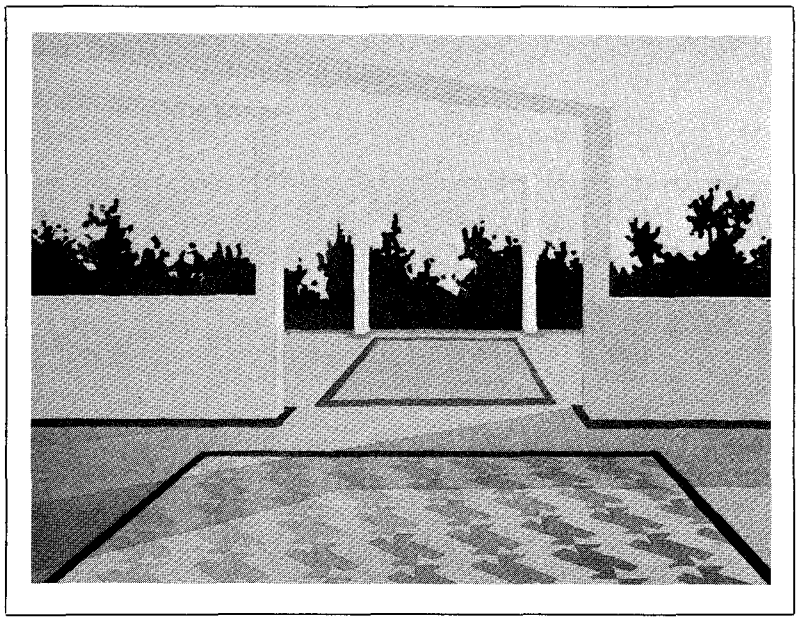

BOYER RICKEL

THE PUBLIC GARDEN

2 a.m. A Charles River breeze. The sudden slowing
Of traffic along Beacon
Quickens the *tic-clack* pace
Of a boy in silver heels. We say

"A boy like that's confused," as we stop
At the light. He steps off the curb, openly
Girlish. We wink, tapping our freshly

Polished boots, born to love order.
When he crosses the street, you can almost make out
A word . . . OKLAHOMA,

In gold sequins on the back
Of his black satin jacket; but in the rhythmic
Swing of his shoulders

It's the Midwestern sky you see rocking,
The constellations hard to distinguish
The stars are so ablaze. Isn't this why you're here?

BARON WORMSER

PETS

As lives sprout purposes, animals will enter
And persist. Glimpsed, saluted, fed and stroked,
Like philosophers' notions they persevere
Serenely when we are off elsewhere.
Their needs are what we make them out to be.
They take affection when it is proferred
And stand up well to the occasional scrutiny
They are subject to, that "how is it then with you"
Which we like to ask at some impertinent,
Wobbly moment, our vacancy focused
On the plight of the unwitting. They scratch an itch,
Roll over, wag a tail, belch, and we return
To our ways, for once not tempted to be importunate.
Their deaths are crises. Such a placidity
Of being, flowing parallel to all our starts
And stops and stutters is comforting. They seemed
To have found out a secret that they were not choosing
As yet to reveal. They were there and there, and when
They are gone it becomes clear, that something
Homemade and approachable has disappeared.

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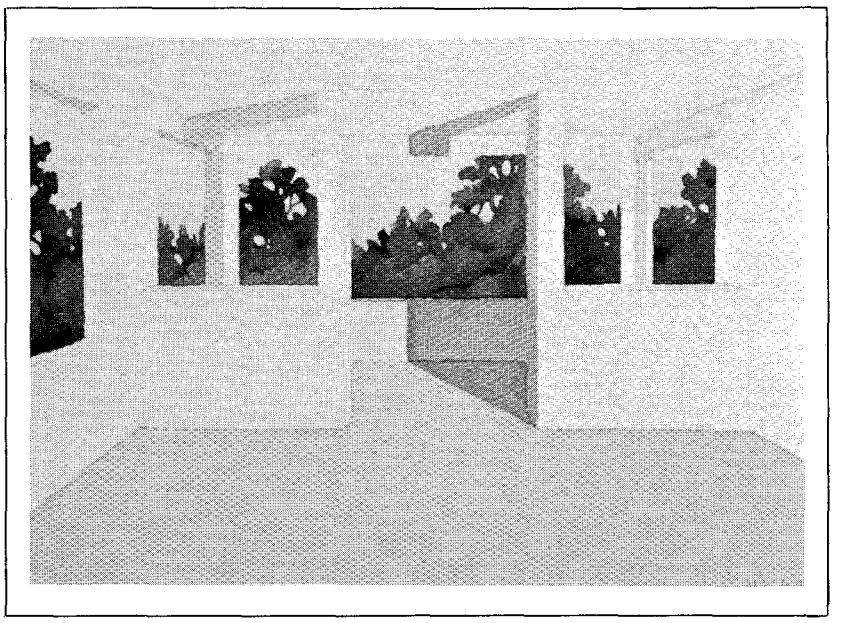

TERRY SAVOIE

DAY-BOOK

". . .nothing ordinary in the garden"
–Laura Jensen

1.

Hesitant, you say, as
several thin entries
in my gardener's day-book

trailing each other
like barn kittens
their she-cat

into this wet morning's
grass:
ditch-stalking, mousing.

2.

Mid-morning. Blood-stained
and nearly the size
of a pullet's first egg,

the grandmother thistle
complains, lists a glossary
of ambitions: bridal
nosegays, lapels,
casket sprays. . .

For you and me
what are boutonnieres
but the genetic yearnings
in our three short rows
of bachelor's buttons
and nothing more.

3.

What struck each of us
under the blue stoniness of the sky
was the garden's obedience,
its willingness to risk comparisons
with gardens and gardens before.

Between this, for instance,
and the closing up of the last,
winter sat here
in her gloved hands,
strawstacks baked
beneath the slow, November sun
and black nights like long flat ribbons
stretched one towards the other.

The differences to speak of
are only surface. This garden
grins and is a man's arm
flexing muscle

before a mirror.
We fiddle in the five
pockets of sweet corn: fertilizer
and hoe and the small discourse
between us.

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Low tide. The great blue herons fish,
wading through silt shallows
on stick-figure stilts. They jab long heads
into the underwater weather; candlefish
thrash silver on harpoon points.

Our boots break into lives here—
barnacle flutings crimped as old lace,
shells that chink and clatter like antique shards.
Sometimes we come upon a Gumboot chiton,
big as a shoe, hunkering on the stones
as if the dream of territorial defenders
still stood up against us.
Guilty,
the battered chiton at our feet says,
its shape that reminds us of extinction.
We set the buckets down, try to put away
the evidence: tide tables, penknives
for prying mussels open. The smell
of greed, like loose change, is unshakeable
from our pockets.
We walk on,
but the sealed lips of oysters don't give
anything away, the iodine stain of kelp
spreads to the neap line, and herons step
just so in the shallows with their dripping
bills, like farmers through their rice paddies.

CAROLYNE WRIGHT

HERONS AT TAHUYA (HOODS CANAL, WASHINGTON)

We walk, and tide creeps up the barnacles,
silt crackles with millions of flagella
welcoming the rich sea home.
A heron folds up the long splints
of its legs, sails out across the bay
on slow ailerons, a dream contraption
from the early days of flight.

All calendar long, tide will rise
and turn back on the tables,
herons will lift in the wind
on their mysterious errands.
We will throw the oysters back, pack the car,
and drive off. We will catch the last ferry
back to our inevitable city.
The Olympics will glisten in the rear-view
distance, like knives held up to the light,
and our unnamed thoughts will color us
like nautilus—a hue for every nuance
of emotion—water gone for miles
between the tides, as if longing for home.
How will the herons go on gliding then,
accompanied by so much silence?

(for Helena Hileman)

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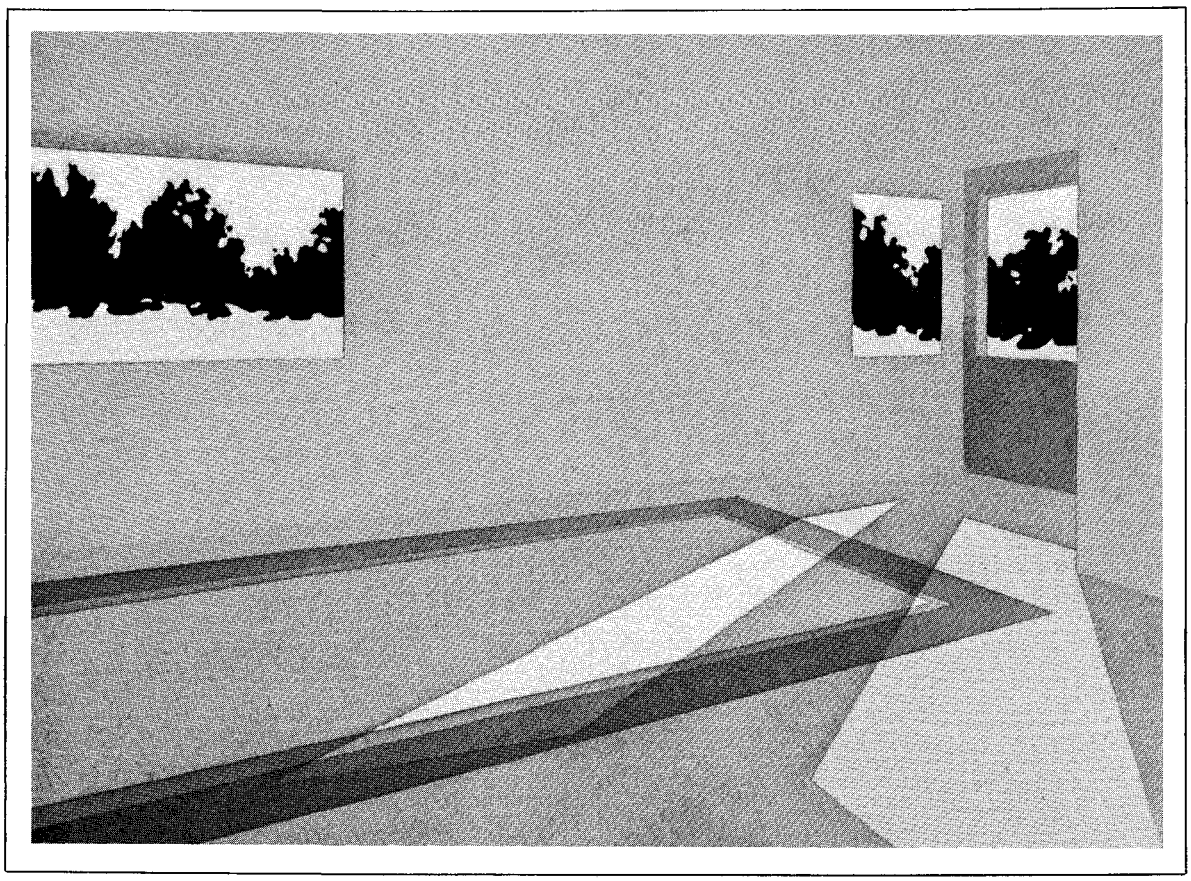

JAMES YATES

CONFUSIONS AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE BIRDHOUSE

There must be two thrushes standing in your heart,
two birds that blend both dark and light with good
and bad as it happens in the woods, who hold
no judgments because they hold no robes.

No, there is no cold, stilted crow
brooding in your left eye,
that little embalmer of the telephone lines,
who seeks only the dark alley of his own soliloquy,
and seeds the clouds with morning thunder.

And there is no hummingbird of-the-body in you,
no Egyptian over-soul, appearing
with the dignity of an exclamation point
to beat back the green pods of summer with his wings
and crop the hair from out your eyes, and never
admit to the boredom in things.

There is just this small flock of life in you,
standing in the thicket of your heart, partly felt,
though part of you would not agree; one
is like your favorite man, the other
a seasoned guide. The first
touches your breasts and so finds his way in,
the second knows how to hide.

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SIMON PERCHIK

*

I will start as snow :footsteps
unloaded—my arms, legs
my neck gone.
Nothing will ever be cold again.

I will hear in my chest
suddenly a tree rocking :my heart
returning to wood

to a rootless cell
that floated—I will retrace my pulse
to that first tide, that leaf
still pushing me ashore
—I am rushing into that warm salt
where the soul was spawned
was all trees blossoming :snowflakes
soaring with leaves—I will start

fallen, as a rotting log, as drifts
carry back the worn out world
—my twigs, my skull
jettisoned :an offering
that my torso keep
a vague direction, my gut
told where its salt
can still be heated—I will be home
guided by ice
coming apart in my chest.

ANDREW HUDGINS

MAGNOLIAS

Alabama: the first, a girl child.
The rocking chair is cold, the porch colder,
but I could sit here for a year,
thinking of my child, her dwindling.

The magnolias too are windswept
graveward. Neither live oak nor reed
resists the weather's breath,
but each lets go its green, its living part.

Spring, when it comes, is at first wet,
becoming lush, giving way
to the darkgreen darkness
where magnolia leaves hover like wings,
inches off the receding earth.

Then the blooms on the tree will open.
They are so clearly flesh of
our flesh. Without the prolonging bone,
so clearly transitory.

When touched—and I touch them—
the blossoms smudge,
the flesh dying beneath my acid hands,
turning brown in the shape of fingertips.

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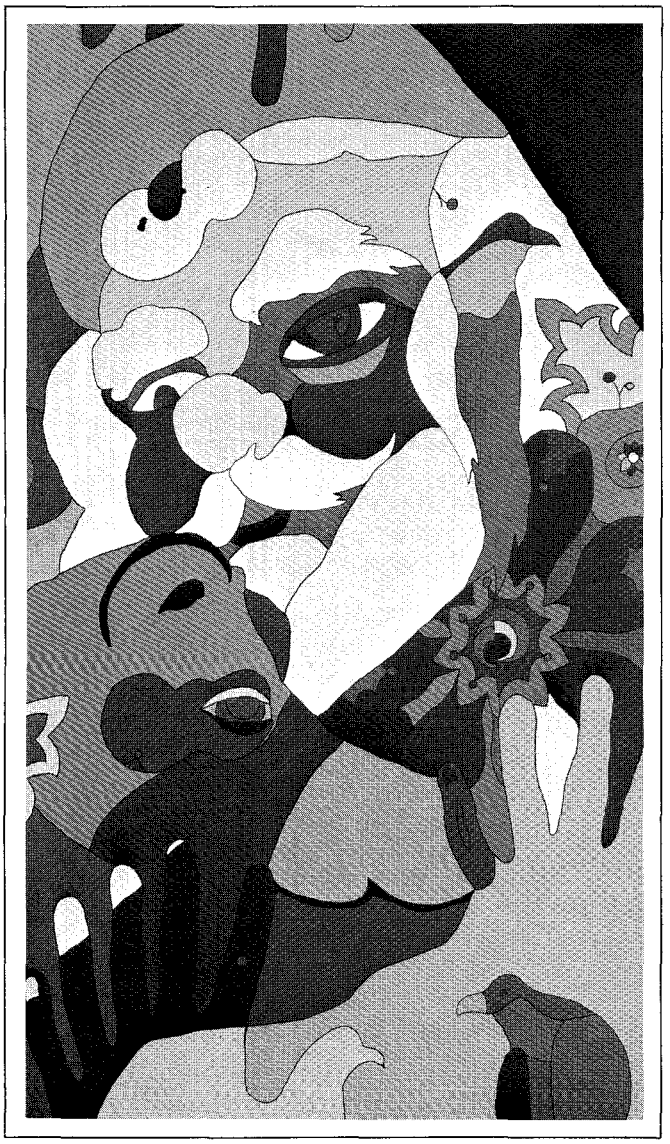
THE WOMAN WHO WAS NEVER GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE AN HONEST WOMAN GOES TO THE **SLEEZEE MOTEL** WITH HER LOVER

BARBARA HAAS



Frieda and Jim are having a rendezvous. At the Sleepy Pal Motel. It's on Highway 41. Out there by the 90 foot tall papier-mâché Santa Claus that was designed by Randy's boss at Sears. Santa's eyes are powder blue. His nostrils are black. The rest is red and white. Santa's head exploded last year, but the fire department under the Lloyd administration swiftly extinguished the flames. It gets hot in that hollow man. They replaced the head. Because the boss at Sears had designed several 90 foot tall Santas. Now a headless Santa lies on his back in a swamp behind Busler's Truck Stop. But that's six miles from the Sleepy Pal.

Frieda parks her Granada behind the motel, near some bushes. She doesn't notice the Santa, or rather, she's driven by it so many times she no longer thinks of it as something amazing. She likes the idea of it, though—a large Santa, for no reason, standing along the highway—but worries about it toppling and crushing children beneath it. Or crashing in on her and Jim at the Sleepy Pal. From their room (number eight, astrologically an energy number for Frieda as charted by the psychic, Mrs. Cullnane, at the Mesker Amusement Arcade), through their window, that one dirty pane Frieda can see between the stiff drapes from her place on the bed (but there is a whole window there, she thinks, and is right, even though she's never taken time to check), Santa's knee is visible. That knee is not mixed with memories of mommy and daddy and her own children and assembling train sets at two a.m. any longer. One afternoon of those pleasant images ruined her rendezvous. On November 16 at 4:35 p.m. Jim folded her tenderly in his arms. He was not wearing his leather underwear that day. "We need some change for the Magic Fingers," he said. Frieda wasn't crying, but she was misty-eyed. Those damn memories. . . ! They sat around for the rest of that afternoon, got to know each other, even though there wasn't much to say. He was in food sales. "Very lucrative," he said. "Surprisingly lucrative," he said several minutes later when she asked again of his position. She thought him extremely lucid on the subject of lucrative ventures; she, the proverbial honky-tonk woman: waitress jobs, secretarial positions, odd, negligible, oftentimes shady doings in kitchens and barrooms across the city. Thirty-eight years old, three children by three different men, never married. Why did she keep bearing illegitimate children? Here are some other questions:

1) Didn't she know of effective birth control methods?
2) Didn't she know of more effective ones?
3) Why wouldn't these men claim their children?

She's tight-lipped on the subject in a self-preservatory way. Frieda can say "go to hell" with a look.

BARBARA HAAS writes from California and has been in the writing program at the University of California, Irvine.

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Did she tell Jim about her children during their heart to heart? Well, yes, he knows—but not in a way that will affect his wallet. He was a little sorry they'd even begun to talk. He thought, I know. And she knows I know, and I know she knows I know. So. But he still felt free of any obligation. It's not like I've seen them and know their names and favorite colors, he reasoned. Then she dragged out her tattered wallet (of course tattered—not even leather, just polyurethane covered cardboard) and showed him school pictures of Johnny, Susy, Billy. He didn't pay for a long time, and then he did. A woman needs a man sometimes in that way.

Frieda doesn't want to die at the Sleepy Pal. She doesn't articulate her thoughts thoroughly, but she knows a poem which begins: "We have all been in rooms we cannot die in. . . " and feels that it sums up her attitude completely. She won't die at the Sleepy Pal. Why die at the Sleepy Pal? What's there to make her die? Jim loves her in a cash register sort of way, with an eye for debits and credits. He wouldn't have her bumped off as she's heard some people do in order to rid themselves of their mistresses. In that room with its tri-color shag carpeting and empty motel smell, she is safe. No heart attacks (she takes a couple of drinks each evening which scientists now claim helps cleanse away cholesterol deposits around the heart.) Nothing. How many ways could she die in the motel? Could slip in the bathtub and drown. Could electrocute herself. Could set her hair on fire with a curling iron, etc., etc.

For safety's sake, the Posey County Fire Department says this:

Do not put your Christmas tree near the fireplace.
Do not put your Christmas tree in the shower.

The Posey County Fire Department knows of all the different ways one could die—can even name them—and has its favorites. Call them during business hours at (812) 425-2611.

Jim has not yet arrived, so Frieda must go around the motor court to the glassed-in area marked OFFICE to get the room key. Usually Jim does this. A woman shouldn't have to walk into the office of a motel (a motel used for just that reason) and request a single room for the afternoon. She should stay in the car while he does it, or, better, she should open the door to number eight where Jim has been waiting and enter her rendezvous innocent of its mechanics. She shouldn't have to give her license plate number to the kid behind the counter so he will know that she is one of the locals, thus there for one reason.

She unlocks number eight, leaves the light off, though it's getting late. The feel of her rendezvous gradually comes back. The tint of the sun slashes and their position on the wall. The friendly velvet matador hanging over the bureau, ready, his eyes fixed on a bull somewhere off the canvas to the left. She has insight into the matador. One afternoon while Jim prepared himself in the bathroom she created him. He is very good, she began, but will not win. Through no fault of his own. The bull is not his equal, insofar as animals are not equal to men. The bull is better and will tire but easily finish him. Already, she further imagined, the matador's gold and velvet edges soften and begin to blend back into the arena. She came closer and saw that he was really nothing in himself, his sad, blue eyes only dry dots. The knee actually disappeared. He was only the background space left unoccupied. She would've continued, but Jim interrupted her from behind with what she later came to know and love as "Variations on the Flying Love Embrace."

"He's married. Don't love a married man," said Janet, Frieda's best friend at work, as they ate dinner at the Cafe Venice. Frieda ate the sweet'n'sour pork. A lot of bus people were waiting around inside, in between Greyhounds, one eye on the cacciatora, one on the terminal across the street. That particular table at the Cafe Venice had seen a discussion of the same topic just two days earlier as Frieda and her sister dined together. Her sister, Sharla, was happily married, had four children and was big with the fifth.

"You's ready to order?" the waitress had wanted to know. The placemats at the Cafe Venice never varied, always four-colored fox hunts laminated in plastic, their edges curling atop the red and white checked table cloths. "What dressing on your salads? French, Blue Cheese, or Eye-talian?"

They had both ordered, and Sharla said haughtily over her glass of sherry, "I've heard of private investigators who check on things like that. Wives call them, wanting polaroids." She paused. A sudden expression of giddy revulsion crossed her face. "I hope you weren't thinking of sneaking around with my husband. Why are you telling me this? That'd be incest, wouldn't it? I don't understand you, Frieda. You're not interested in that, are you?"

It is a fact that Frieda has never met the wife. Nor seen a picture of her. Jim has kids, though. In high school, she thinks, or maybe they have graduated by now. Once Jim's son had dropped him off at the Sleepy Pal. Because Jim's car was in the garage. He was thin, pale-looking boy, not at all handsome, his face bleared with acne. Frieda had just pulled off the highway and into the motor court as Jim was getting out of the car. From fear, she slammed on the brakes. Her tires screamed on the pavement, and she came to a complete stop in the drive of the Sleepy Pal as she watched Jim shut the car door, wave good-bye to his son. The son didn't look around, all that stringy blonde hair hanging down in his face. He performed some muscular maneuvers with the gear shift, cut a sharp corner on the gravel lot, and shot back out onto the highway.

Inside room eight Frieda had wanted to know everything about it. Did the son know? How many members of the family knew? Did this mean he would get a divorce? Jim had shrugged it off. He said that he'd told the son he was there on business, that he was seeking to supply the Sleepy Pal's vending machines with sandwiches. Then he pulled a lacy something from the breast pocket of his sports jacket. He held it out to Frieda, a barely-there red nylon nightie. "Tell me how much you love it," he'd said. How could she refuse? She forgot all about the boy.

Jim is late today. It's nearly four o'clock. He's never been this late. Outside, cars whiz by the large Santa, his one free arm twisted up in a wave, his powder blue eyes expressing mild surprise at the coming night.

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One commits suicide and adultery, Frieda thinks as she mixes herself a cup of instant coffee (coffee: courtesy of the Sleepy Pal; water: tap water.) The observation interests her. How appropriate the connection. She stops momentarily to consider the sort of love she commits each week. It is a kind of dying underneath his 200 pound frame, flattened, his shoulders pressed into her, like heels digging into something soft. She loves him the only way she can, a tilt of the hip, some skillful movements. She loves him so as not to suffocate sometimes.

Muddled with the sound of cars on the highway, Frieda hears the roar of an engine drawing nearer. A slash of light fills the window, cuts a vertical pattern on the far wall. Jim has come at last. She pours out her cup of coffee, pulls some candles and the special red lightbulb from her purse. She places the candles on the nightstand, quickly unscrews the old bulb and replaces it with the red one. She begins unbuttoning her blouse, and Jim knocks at the door. As she opens the door she flicks the lamp on for dramatic effect, all that fuzzy, warm light oozing from behind her. Only it is not Jim. For a moment she wants to apologize, to draw together her blouse, flip off the light, and to finally slam the door. It is only the rather ugly, as she can see quite clearly now, glare-faced son. He clears his throat and scrapes at the sidewalk with the toe of his sneaker.

"Did something happen?" she asks. She pulls the collar of her blouse tightly together at the base of her throat.

"Miss White," the boy says. He pauses and looks past her, blinking into the soft light. "He told me to drive out here to room eight just to tell you that he won't be here this evening."

Frieda watches him, looks for a resemblance. But he doesn't look in her eyes, only past them. Over her shoulder. At the door jamb. She wants to know if Jim is sick, or dying, which hospital he's in. "Oh, I see," she says. She moves back into the room and with her free hand begins to close the door. "Well, all right, then." She can call the hospitals herself.

The boy steps closer. "Miss White." He fixes his eyes on her blouse, on a place where maybe a bit of skin still shows. "He did tell me to tell you," he says. The breath catches in his throat. He swallows the words, darts a quick glimpse at her face, smiles, satisfied. "That if you have anything you want to say to him that you can say it to me, if you like." The mild light on his face disguises the acne, but she can see the tiny scars and pits that ridge the skin. He slaps his hand against his thigh, as if to spur the words. "And I'll tell him for you."

"Well, I don't think I have any messages."

The son reaches into his shirt pocket and pulls out a folded piece of notebook paper. "Look, you don't have to say it. You can write it down, if you like. Here. I won't even read it. Because it's for him."

Frieda hugs closer to the door. She doesn't reach for the scrap of paper.

The boy smiles and looks at the paper held out in his hand between them. It is awkward there. He giggles. "Okie-dokie." He crams it back into his pocket.

STEPHEN DOBYNS

JAPANESE GIRL WITH RED TABLE

after Balthus

The Japanese girl thinks she will die today.
In her mirror, she sees she is already dying
and she tries to compose her face into how
it will appear in death: forgiving, forgetful.
Between her white breasts, she already sees
the red mark of the knife—red as the red table
on the floor behind her, red as the red border
of the purple robe falling open around her
as she kneels before her mirror. Yes, she thinks,
she will destroy herself today; and her lover,
who has not come, will hear of it from people
crying to each other as he passes on the street
with his destination a solid object in his mind,
as real as the red table or the black and white
vase upon the table. He will hear that a girl
has been found with a knife in her breast,
but he won't believe it's she as he continues
toward the red table in his mind. Then at last
some friend will bring him the news, tell him
while he sits with his wife in the early evening,
eating sweets and drinking tea as he describes
the small business of his day. He will be holding
a porcelain cup with a picture of a single gull,
and he will listen to how a girl has been found
lying naked in her own blood on the golden rug
he gave her, while within him the words will be
eating his body as fire eats paper, as he tries
hopelessly to hold his cup steady and make no face.

"I want to thank you for driving out here to tell me," Frieda says. She can't be sure that he is listening to her. He studies something under his thumbnail. "You didn't have to do that."

The boy swings around and looks at his car. He laughs. "Oh, you don't have to do anything. He just wanted me to tell you." He steps off the sidewalk. "I'm going to go now. Got to eat supper." He walks around the car and then turns. He squints one eye, makes a clucking sound with his tongue, and nods past Frieda at something in the room. "Does he like it that way?"

Frieda turns to look, sees only the walls and furniture warm and dreamy in the light. She turns back quickly, checks the boy's position. "I don't know. He's never said. I've never asked."

The boy turns. She can imagine the smirk on his face. "Okie-dokie."

Inside, Frieda must wait in the dark for what seems like forever until the red bulb cools so she can unscrew it and put it back into her purse. □

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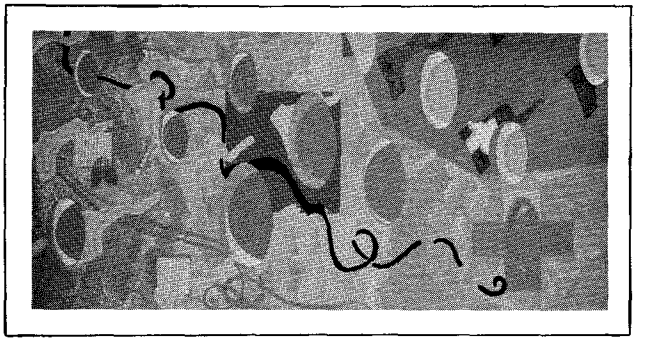
LOGNOTES

REG SANER



I.

Their solar system and companion planets are shockingly cheaply made—forged of common pig iron with what looks like high sulphur content, since they grudge public monies for non-functional objects. Even their sun is a dismal affair, kept burning at a third to a fifth of the light we demand of ours, and its nameless planets creep sluggishly through stinted orbits—the nearest ones bearing crudely whitewashed numerals.

For ages, the government provided no stars whatever, and to this hour their moon is a patchwork of fieldstone, used brick, mortar leavings, smashed jugs, slag, cinders, and trash. This "expense" of labor and material they justify through the bleak glow provided night travelers—but above all to avoid stumbling over sleep-holes. For utilitarian reasons, their moon is phase-less.

Obviously they lack dependable stars. When 3 or 4 shoddy examples were tried long ago they quickly burnt out and were not replaced. Irregularly they take advantage of misfortune befalling forgetful persons to supply this lack.

The image of an entire constellation they either cannot grasp or from ingrained niggardliness refuse to entertain.

II.

Yet they admire excellence in handwork. Of a fine mason or carpenter they say his left hand is "all woman," while his right is "much man." Loafers and botchers are those with a hand turned "queer" or born that way.

If, say, merely one finger of a bricklayer's right hand becomes homosexual, quite decent courses may be laid, and nobody the wiser. But should the affected finger induce sexual deviation in its fellows, work suffers, ending in joblessness.

State therapists devote hours counseling even a single digit—wheedling, reasoning, suggesting experiences. When therapy restores lost masculinity, amputation is avoided. Thumbs appear most intensely loyal to sex norms. All 4 fingers of a left hand may go lesbian without influencing the thumb's femininity, but since a normally feminine thumb shows aversion to lesbian fingers, impairment still results—and bad work.

Persons reaching prodigious levels of digital skill—pianists, guitarists, surgeons—reap a considerable prestige tainted with private suspicion that their hands are either bi-sexual or utterly amoral.

III.

Planks sawn and milled from condensed rain are fed into planers, shapers, or worked with adzes and rasps. Boards pulse, like pressure through hose. The ping of nails rises in pitch, becoming a permanent twitter as the final hammer-blow drives the head flush. Rooms intended for brainwork—offices, libraries, schools—require stone, because once driven the nails chirp incessantly. Beams of great thickness continue digesting storm sounds, and I have stepped into massively timbered warehouses where the aviary effect of nails, high winds, and random guttural effects of thunder overwhelmed me.

Their quietest planks derive from sub-desert regions to the south, but distance and scarcity make these expensive. In contrast, planks from northerly sea coasts fetch so little that rain merchants stock them for outbuildings, or homes of the poor, or of deaf persons rarely visited.

IV.

A male who has over the years ejaculated sperm equaling his body-volume finds his tissues withering of testicular discouragement. By middle age he falls into habitual computing of volumetric sums, though powerless to curb his innate drive to "quench" members of the opposite sex.

His desires feed on the fact that any woman *receiving* her body-volume withers correspondingly. Similarly, her inborn urge to "spill" males tramples down the clear common-sense of self-preservation. Both sexes being, therefore, a prey to fits of suicidal attack, their rages produce flurries, guttural exulting, followed at once by morose rule-of-thumb calculations. At times this common sadness in Pyrrhic victories buying "spill" at the price of "quench" and "quench" at the cost of "spill" nurtures almost a bond.

Nevertheless, the characteristic widow is known by her leer—derived from having provoked, at last, the final c.c.

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The sad-eyed female turns out to be one bereft by a rival, some woman so overpoweringly odious that the deserting husband will risk ruin to "quench" her. Yet for the woman abandoned, improved tissue-prospects count little as against the bitterness of being unable now "to put the fill on him." Or, as they would say, to elicit "his terminal squirt."

V.

Because of supposed beneficial emanations which earth focuses on slumbering bodies they sleep in holes in the ground, narrow or broad depending on shoulders. Each evening's cavity is fresh-dug, with spoil going to fill the previous night's hole. Later they seed the mounds, usually in March, not with comestible stock, which given their stinginess we might expect, but with plantlife apparently useless. The word *weed* bears implications they resent.

When I wondered aloud about sowing vegetables, I was cut short. "Eat food grown where one has slept? You can't be serious!"

Still, if a man lives a long time his property ends riddled with sleep-holes whose mounds crowd almost to overlapping. "Almost," because exact congruence is scrupulously avoided. This tabu of sleeping twice in the same hole they balk at explaining, and shrug, as if unwilling to discuss the self-evident.

VI.

Some deep blooms are actually fairly shallow. Only a few particles in the bloom recall themselves—and for but a few thousand years.

Within the genuine deep bloom each particle remembers not only its own total past but every stage of its interrelation with other particles in the whiff. Flowers bursting with the most devastating generosity include blossoming vines resembling our wisteria, but in its wild state, and a species of myosotis.

A brick wall growing masses of yellow flowers may in a dozen years produce not a single deep bloom.

Though at their deepest these open scarcely half as wide as a tablespoon, even mystics allow their nostrils to ply just the outer fringes of the aroma-zone. Never closer than fifteen paces, and usually when the blossom is shattering or windblown.

Whether eons of mineral and vegetable smoke ravelling into one's brain from the ends of time bring lethal anguish or lethal delight seems a moot question. Bystanders argue pro or con with such vehemence as to betray uncertainty on both sides—except that the death must be one of a vast, an unimaginable intricacy.

Clustered for hours staring down at the victim's extravagant posture, they wait till no one is looking to steal glimpses of its eyes and mouth—especially the mouth—as if from a sealed well or a threshold.

VII.

Gravity there works on persons only when you keep it in mind, which is why preparing for sleep they strap themselves to slabs of ballast. Among the well-to-do these are lead castings embossed with plant motifs: a semblance of thistle for one genealogical line, tamarisk or cedar for that, eucalyptus for another. The lower classes lash their ankles to sandstone shards scratched with rudimentary stamens, leaves, petal-outlines—and the sleeper's last initial.

During waking hours thoughts of gravity are necessarily uppermost. Yet victims occur. Heated political arguments can slowly lift a man. No harm is done if before reaching the altitude of his body-height he recalls gravity. Then he settles the needed inches slowly as he arose, without jarring. But if enthusiasm or joy or rage elevate him beyond this limit, an irreversible ascent sets in at 16 feet per second.

Should bystanders care to take the trouble they may set fire to him and produce, thereby, a cheap star. Or they may shrug him off. Stars thus achieved aren't very bright to begin with, and dim quickly—either because combustion expires for lack of material, or through the person's high recessional velocity.

Really great occasions befall when some enormously fat creature takes flight; however, the protective mechanism obsessing fat people with gravity makes these gala events exceptional. When the rare exception does chance, it provokes mixed feeling. Pity for the misfortune of another, but also frank relish at the sight of a first-rate star that burns well—often for several nights running.

VIII.

They have 4 more or less reliable elements. 4 only. Anything not earth, water, air or fire is "a substance" not an element. Their physicists may hypothesize a 5th element called "none of the preceding" but popular derision forces them to work at the most abstruse levels of obliquity. In any case, what their 4 elements lack in number they make up in fits of hostility.

A man drinking a glass of water on the wrong day or at the wrong hour may at once dry to a husk. A family basking at its fireplace may be suddenly frostbitten. When air "locks," an entire track meet immobilizes. A pole-vaulter stuck like a blossom atop his flexed pole; a broad-jumper held in mid-lunge. With muscular strain undiminished, a "lock" of even 5 minutes may shorten or cancel a fine career.

Naturally enough this capricious hostility includes the element earth. If during daytime, little harm results. At night, however, with everyone in his sleep-hole, the beneficial infusion of earth-waves is reversed. Sleepers crawl forth the next morning as great puffs of grey-green mold. Close friends and family prove recognizable only to each other. The mold slimes off under long rubbing with damp burlap, later burnt, despite its loathesome stench. Even the smoke—a viscid plasm—does not blow away but lies about until shoveled and scraped into deep ditches carefully filled, tamped, and sealed with asphalt. The sites bear incised tablets reading, "Disturbed Earth."

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IX.

During the whole of my stay I could never be sure what becomes of deep-bloom remains. "Relatives decide," was the most I could learn. The answer may or may not lie in certain pale blue plastic envelopes one occasionally sees outside doors during the height of the floral season.

The bags are semi-transparent—except for color—and identical with grey-black trashbags each municipality supplies to householders on its tax rolls.

Outside a lavishly riveted door I have seen one containing what resembled the instep and toes of a foot. And a hand whose fingers grasped an ear lobe. On scrutiny, a dark-haired male head with luxuriant mustache. Bag-pressure flattened its nose, the blue plastic film flaring each nostril and adhering to both lids over the bulge of closed eyes. Where the parted lips gaped, I made out vague beadings of moisture.

Common trash agents swinging both colors of bag into compacter trucks take care not to exceed their bursting strength. Despite their rarity, the blue bags receive treatment identical to that given refuse—fed with the others into the compacter's main chamber by a huge metal auger, like those in artesian wells.

I have asked about spillage, but the trash-agents to a man seem bent on evasion. "It's an ordinance," each kept repeating—"anything not properly bagged, we won't touch it."

Yet sometimes one sees a mongrel trotting by with a hand in its mouth, or a magpie swooping into trees with a finger. Once, a jay whose beak worried at a tatter of navel, apparently a child's.

X.

Their rare aesthetic outlets center on the trenches of "disturbed earth," for which municipal funds commission sculptures, usually pedestaled.

Choice of subject lies with the artists, who work at energetic and defiant pitch in the official "contemporism" mode—official by default of any other. Sculptors visit the quarries for listening one by one to marble blocks of proper size. Usually they hear nothing, adjust their hands to different pressure on the block's dinted surface, listening anew. The responsive blocks "speak" in some detail: "Orpheus turned back to Eurydice, harp slipping from grasp, eyes aghast, mouth incredulous; muscular torsion plying left flank." Average blocks mutter hints: "madonna seated," "girl in bloom," "bank president fully clothed."

Actually, some sculptors prefer laconic blocks, and pass over marble considered "talky." The same block may say "shepherd reclining" to one sculptor and to another, "monumental snail." Sculptors past their prime may listen at each of a dozen quite different chunks and receive not so much as a mumble. Or may hear "swan," "swan," "swan," "swan," "swan," "swan" right down the line.

This advantage of listening to one's material ought to be great, except that blocks "speaking" in tones of undeniable sincerity may tell flat lies.

In fact a sculptor confided to me that after whacking for months at a colossal block which had said it was prepared to become "cavalry hero mounted on rearing charger," and all the time believing every syllable, he found in the end that the block held nothing but the penis and scrotum of a 3 year old boy. "Of course," he said, "I grabbed my heaviest mallet and smashed it to baby powder." Adding, distantly as if to himself, "Otherwise you lose their respect."

XI.

Among them, anyone who has beheld or is the blood relative of a deep-bloom victim notices, thereafter, tricks of solar convection accompanying his shadow.

Probably a sparrow or starling flitting through it senses no rise in temperature. Still, on raw, winterish days the count of winged insects hovering within such a person's umbral volume exceeds those in adjacent sunlit air by a factor of several hundreds.

Should that person move suddenly aside, the wings stiffen and quickly cease. As if robbed of the shadow's body-heat they fall to the pavement, glinting slightly, like mica-dust swept by a broom into one's outline.

DON STAP

A LETTER AT THE END OF WINTER

The creek, its dark spring waters
rushing into next week.
From where it rains
in the woods of lifeless trees
from where the water turns over
under gray skies like a snake
flashing its belly saying I am dead
can't you see I am dead.
In the culvert where the stream
crosses under the road—
bread crumbs and spastic fish.
To where the muskrat chugged upstream
with a twig in his teeth or
sat gnawing roots on the muddy bank.
The roots, hairless albino creatures
who never say a word.
The mallard drake and his brown woman.
Where did they go the next day?
Crows with their rusty bicycle horns
their worn-out pair of false wings
always too heavy for them.
A kettleful of blackbirds pours across
the sky. This is it this is it.
And the wind that can't say no.

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The Gray Ones

She was fourteen, just a kid, and it was already in her by the time I inherited her from the Intern going Off-Service. He had not left an Off-Service Note in the chart, though, and even the Admission Note was incomplete, because after coming in at 2 a.m. she'd gone directly to the operating room. She'd come from Arizona in a private Lear Jet chartered by her father, and brought the kidney with her, floating in an electrolyte solution inside an ice chest. Later she'd show pictures of herself in the airport in Phoenix, a cheerful round-faced girl in designer jeans and a fringed shirt, her pupils blazing red from the flashbulb. On the floor between her cowboy boots sat the red and white ice chest, the kind you usually see full of beer at a football game. But on Rounds the first morning all I saw was a beautiful, pallid young girl, asleep. She looked like someone I knew.

She moaned with pain when we pulled off the dressing. There it was, on the left side, between navel and the ridge of hipbone, beneath an incision angled like an appendectomy scar. The cut was like a mouth sewn shut; flesh bulged up around it, as though there was a fist inside, pushing out.

"How's her output?" asked the Renal Fellow, Raphael. Raphael was a hulking Italian from Bronxville, in a flannel shirt that was half-untucked and muddy lumberjack boots, with scraggly long black hair and beard and tobacco-stained fingers; he seemed unaware of how wild he looked—or totally indifferent. He pulled the chart from my hands. "Incredible! Four hours post-op and she's already put out a liter."

"Is that a good sign?" I asked.

"Does it mean she won't reject? I don't know. But I've never seen one open up so fast—it's amazing." He hefted the collecting bag before us; it was connected to a plastic tube that went to the foley catheter in her bladder. Urine tinged with blood poured through the tubing as we watched.

"I tell you, if anyone deserves to have their transplant work it's this kid," Raphael said. She had been on dialysis two years, he said, already she'd gotten pericarditis twice and high blood pressure and severe bone disease—not to mention the anemia and slowed growth that all kids on dialysis had. She had a rare tissue type, and so many antibodies to foreign tissue, too, that it had been nearly impossible to cross-match her with the kidneys of potential donors. But finally a kidney had come—from a young man whose skull had been crushed in a motorcycle accident in the New Mexico desert.

"How are you at starting lines?" Raphael said.

"Pretty good. Why?"

"Well, you're going to have to get daily lytes and creatinines for quite a while. And she gave the other Intern a hard time. Wouldn't even let him draw blood."

"Great. That's what I love about kids."

"Hey, Robin!" He shook her until her eyes opened—her first half-yawn was stopped abruptly by the pain in her belly, and then she was awake. "Meet your new doctor."

Drowsily she looked me over—in a way that I could tell she'd had a lot to do with doctors and didn't like them much. I could see the battles ahead.

"Hello," she said. "How's my kidney?"

"Fine," I said. Now too I saw why she looked familiar: it was her coloring, the fairness of her skin, scattered with freckles, and her hair which was what is usually described as strawberry blonde, and the even pallor of her eyelashes and lips. She was the kind who must rely on blood for coloring, who chaps and burns on an overcast day at the beach. Before medical school, when I was living in San Francisco and trying to be Frank O'Connor, I knew someone with that coloring, a woman who would drive me up in the Berkeley hills in her boyfriend's Triumph—she used to say that when she closed her eyes her face disappeared. And when her green eyes closed, it did.

"What you do today," said Raphael, "is draw her bloods—send them *stat*—make sure she's on the list for a renal scan, and follow her I's and O's real close. And write for her steroid taper. Got it?"

"Yeah, sure. What's her name again?"

"Robin. And one more thing. Don't stick yourself when you're getting her bloods. She's got hepatitis."

* * *

I have to admit that I never much liked taking care of kids. When I was a medical student, I worked on a Pediatrics ward in a county hospital that was full of hopelessness—infants with irreparable defects in their hearts, and kids whose skulls were fractured in car accidents and who would never wake up, and freaky inhuman creatures with wide-set eyes and low ears and dull, reptilian expressions, babies that would never assemble a thought. And it was too much for me. It got me in a way that an old man dying of congestive heart failure or lung cancer didn't get me. I could handle the old guys: a good number of them had ruined themselves, and anyway, they'd lived. But not the kids. Try sticking a skinny little butterfly needle into the chubby wrist of a three-year-old and you'll see what I mean. You hurt them; they hate you. It's not just babies either, it's kids. Ten and twelve and fourteen, you're still part of the disease, the torture. You want to give up and cry with them, and if you feel like that you could never be much of a pediatrician. The only part I liked was talking to the mothers.

So I avoided children. It wasn't difficult; there were more than enough other things to learn in medical school, and it was not anything that would be noticed, much less commented upon, by anyone. And as an Intern in New York City, I made the same choice. It was either two months of Pediatrics, or I could risk hepatitis and spend the time on the dialysis and transplantation unit, the Renal Service. I chose Renal.

And here, the first morning on Rounds, I made an ironic discovery: of my half dozen or so patients, three were kids. Next to Robin, whose kidney failure had come from a rare disease called Henoch-Schoenlein Purpura, there was Tommy Tomano, a sixteen-year-old boy with Alport's Syndrome, a disease that had killed his kidneys and made him almost

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deaf; and in the bed across from Robin was Donna Green, a twelve-year-old who looked six. As a baby she had radiation therapy for a tumor in her belly—the tumor disappeared, but her kidneys gradually shrank and failed. The fourth kid in the room, not my patient, was Karen Liebowitz, with Lupus Erythematosus. The four of them were in a room together, separate from other patients, not because of their age but because they had transplants, and were subject to their own sorts of complications and diseases.

We circled the room, feeling the fist-sized lumps of foreign tissue in their bellies to make sure they were not tender or enlarged, which could signify rejection; we picked up collecting bags full of urine; we put stethoscopes to ribcages to listen for the crackling of pneumonia; we searched inside mouths for yeast infections; we palpated the snake-like fistulas in their arms for the whirring that meant blood still flowed—if the transplants failed, they'd be used again.

They were strange kids. Disease had joined them in a family, made them all of a kind. Not only were they all small and baby-faced and fat in the middle and thin in the arms and legs, not only did they all have fistulas snaking up their arms, but they shared a certain tinge of skin. Clay dust might have been rubbed into them, or lead-colored blood might run in their veins. Robin was less dull than the others—I don't know why, maybe an accident of chemistry, maybe she hadn't been on dialysis as long—in her fresh complexion the gray of uremia and the yellow of hepatitis were scarcely visible.

But the kids shared more than coloration. There was something in the odd way they watched us, the way they lay in bed as if so accustomed to spending their days there and feeling sick and seeing doctors come by that they could not imagine life any other way. And they talked like doctors:

"What's my creatinine today?"

"My output's two thousand three hundred cc's and yesterday it was three thousand. Does that mean I'm rejecting?"

"How much longer am I getting Imuran?"

"My blood pressure's high. Do you think we should go up on my Hydralazine?"

"Is my foot-drop going to get better now I'm off dialysis?"

Raphael waved their questions aside. "Give him a break—he hasn't had a chance to read your charts yet."

And we went to finish Rounds. There were twenty other patients to see. I had an old poet with diabetes and kidney failure, a businessman with uncontrollably high blood pressure and kidney failure, the wife of an African diplomat with a mysterious rash and kidney failure (both probably caused by African doctors), and a lady in her fifties who had been on dialysis a long time and now was so demented we were going to let her die.

At the end we came to the Dialysis Center, a long room with a dozen beds, each occupied by a man or woman in street-clothes, and a dozen machines. Out of ashen arms came plastic tubes, surprisingly bright with blood, which curled toward the coils and tanks of the dialysis machines. Some patients were watching the televisions suspended overhead, others read *The Times* or *The New Yorker* or were spared from the general din by the foam earphones of their Walkman tapeplayers. And still others scratched themselves, rhythmically and slowly, as if they did it by the hour. They were mostly outpatients, Raphael said, and they came in shifts, day and night. The room had the air of a bus terminal or a 24-hour variety store, a place continually occupied year after year, whose floor can be scrubbed continually but never cleaned, and where the air itself gets exhausted from uninterrupted breathing. We had only two patients here: a drug addict from Georgia and an ancient, comatose man shipped in from a nursing home to keep his daughters happy. We examined them hurriedly—it was no place to linger.

On our way out, we passed a little boy, three or four at most and already gray as an old nickel, being led in by his mother. When he saw us, massed in white pants and coats like one many-headed ghost, he screamed with terror and broke from his mother. He ran down the corridor, chased by two wide-hipped nurses, and was almost off the ward before they caught him. We could still hear his screaming after they carried him back in.

* * *

"Don't stick me there. They did that yesterday. It still hurts. No, not there either. I don't want to get a scar. If you do it on my hand it hurts too much. And there, if you do it there, I'll get a bruise . . ."

Robin had woken up, unfortunately, when I came to push medications and draw blood.

"What about the other arm?"

She eyed me in disgust.

"You can't go on that side, that's my *fistula* arm. There's too much risk of infection—don't you know that?"

"Of course. Well, I *do* have to get your blood. Do you have any suggestions?"

She gazed down at her arm. Soft, scattered with blonde hairs so fine they were almost invisible, its perfection was marred only by the tape of the intravenous line and a small bruise in the crook of the elbow where blood had been taken last night. If not for the failure of her kidneys, the perfect limb of a pubescent Daisy Buchanan. A Sunbelt version of Daisy Buchanan, but none the less American, one sent to Aspen to ski, to Cancun for sun, destined for a small college in a mountain state, for sufficient but not dangerous learning, and for marriage to a man who could guarantee more of the same. You could see how dialysis botched the whole plan.

"How about there?" she said.

I put my tourniquet around her arm and a vein popped up right below her finger.

"Okay."

"Are you using a number twenty-three butterfly?" she said. "Otherwise it hurts too much."

"Yes, I'm using a number twenty-three."

I pulled back slowly on the syringe.

"Is my kidney really working okay?"

"It's fine. You've put out two or three liters already."

"It is? You know, I carried it myself, all the way from Arizona. I could have had the transplant in Denver, but we came here especially because of the RPGG. I'm going to get that, aren't I?"

I had never heard of it.

"It's experimental. My dad thinks it's the best stuff. He talked with the doctors at every transplant program in the country before I came here. And he read all the studies."

"He's a doctor?"

"No, he's a businessman. Aren't you done yet?"

"Yeah. Hold on here, okay? Just put some pressure with your thumb."

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In his essay "The Technology of Medicine" Lewis Thomas distinguishes three levels of medical technology. At one extreme is the full technology, the medical treatment that can cure disease by eradicating it entirely, the way penicillin can cure syphilis, or a vaccine can prevent smallpox. Once perfected, full technology is simple, cheap and universally effective; and by attacking a disease directly at its source, it leads to few complications.

At the other extreme is nontechnology. It is with nontechnology that the magical, priestly and intangible personal qualities of a physician act to effect healing. In this realm Thomas would place the medicine of the nineteenth century and much of general practice and psychiatry today. Nontechnology is difficult and extremely time-consuming, and the results it achieves, though real, are difficult to measure.

Between these two extremes lie what Thomas calls the halfway technologies. Halfway technologies are at once sophisticated and crude. They are imperfect forms of technology applied to diseases that are only partially understood—they treat the effects of disease but not the cause, they palliate but do not cure. They may extend life, or at times only prolong misery. The treatment of a cancer patient with chemotherapy and radiation, for example, shrinks the tumor but poisons the body, the coronary artery bypass operation detours the obstruction in the heart's blood supply but does not slow the clogging of vessels. Even insulin, which saves diabetics, does not prevent some of them from going blind or losing limbs to poor circulation.

Perhaps the ultimate halfway technology is hemodialysis. Without question, dialysis prolongs life—without it, a person with kidney failure would die in a few days. Yet it is expensive and painful and disabling. Surprisingly few people on dialysis are able to work; surprisingly many are abandoned by their husbands or wives; surprisingly many become apathetic and listless.

The problem is the crude, imperfect way in which dialysis substitutes for the kidneys. Complications abound. With current technology the waste product urea cannot be removed from the blood. From excess urea, or "uremia," come a host of complications—anemia, infections, pericarditis, atherosclerosis, metabolic bone disease, chemical abnormalities, encephalopathies (disturbances of consciousness, including irreversible dementia) and peripheral neuropathies. These alone can make life miserable. And every time dialysis is done, needles must be stuck in the shunt or fistula for access to the circulation—with a risk of clotting, infection, and bleeding that is small each time but significant over a lifetime. A recent review in *Kidney International* concludes that the incidence of complications in hemodialysis is "difficult to answer with an exact percentage," but:

> The complication rate in the young patient is sufficiently high, however, that transplantation should be seriously considered as a means of restoring normal renal function. Of course, one must consider complications from that therapy as well.

* * *

That afternoon we went to Radiology and looked at Robin's first renal scan. Raphael should have known better, I guess, from having seen other transplant patients, but still he got all enthusiastic. It was something in Robin, I think, because I felt it too.

"Look at that—look at that flow." He jabbed his fat right forefinger, with a jagged yellowed nail, toward the fluorescent panel on which hung two pieces of film. The one on the left side showed four separate frames scattered with black dots. "See, there's the dye going in, there's the descending aorta, and there in the left inguinal region, there's the kidney. Look at the way that sucker lights up."

We all looked—me and the other Residents and the radiologist.

"And look over here." He rubbed his finger against the film on the right. "Excretion's just as good. I'm telling you, I've never seen it that good before."

"I have," said the radiologist. "And sometimes those are the ones that reject the worst."

"She won't," said Raphael.

For three days Robin's kidney poured out urine, filling the bag so the nurse would have to come in and empty it every few hours. Robin would lie in bed, surrounded by her stuffed animals and dozens of get-well cards from her classmates in Scottsdale and her aunt and uncle in San Clemente and her camp in Wyoming and the kids she went to Mexico with in sixth grade, and new deliveries of flowers would come to the nurses' station every day, so irises and carnations and roses in cellophane filled her corner of the room, enough flowers all told for a Kentucky Derby winner and a mobster's funeral combined. Her parents were there from eight in the morning to eleven at night—a pleasant, worried-blonde mother and a tensely jovial dad. He was a potbellied guy who favored wide-wale electric-green corduroy pants and sweaters that buttoned down the front, and looked as if he'd feel much more comfortable on a golf course, but he spent his days reading through Xeroxed articles from *The New England Journal of Medicine* and *Kidney International*, so he could give us advice. Every time I came in the room, Dad would want to have a conference about the latest developments. He'd have her urine output totalled to the last cc, and know her last five blood pressures, and he'd want her creatinine as soon as it came off the computer from the lab.

"What do you think?" he'd ask. Robin's mother would look up and smile with her mouth closed.

"Oh, it looks good," I'd say. "Of course you can never tell for sure, you can't predict. But for the moment, everything looks fine."

She was the queen of the room. The other kids struggled to put out a liter of urine a day, and she did it every other hour. Tommy Tomano, the kid in the next bed, was rejecting his kidney—a gift from his mother—and he would get up and walk around the room, his oversized feet flapping, ungainly as rubber swimming flippers; he'd hoist himself up on the side of his bed and sit morosely, working a pencil into his drawing of the 59th Street Bridge as Robin chattered. Then he'd disappear off to dialysis for half a day and come back dull and drawn, and lay his sketchpad aside. Across from Robin, Donna Green hunched into her bed; only one get-well card, from her mother in Yonkers, protected her from the invasion of flowers and cards that marched from Robin's side across the window-ledge. And diagonal to Robin, round Karen Liebowitz began talking nonsense: at night, after her family left, she wandered down the hall, her foley bag dragging on the floor behind her, IV bottles crashing. And Robin's creatinine plummeted.

I came in every morning with

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tubes for bloods, butterfly IV's, syringes of medication, and waited, irritated and hurried, while she chose a spot for me to stick. But then I found myself staying there longer than I needed, talking about her horse in Arizona or what she should see in Manhattan before she went back, or whatever.

Then on the fourth day, the urine stopped as if dammed up inside. Her temperature rose. When I came in with my needles and syringes and the metal boxes which held blood culture bottles, I found her sitting forward in bed, eyes puffy, elbows squeezed into her sides. Her father leaned against the window-ledge, poring over his reprints.

"I'm rejecting, aren't I?" she said.

I said that we weren't sure yet; she might just have an infection.

"Why did this have to happen? It was going so well. It was the best you guys ever saw, that's what you said, isn't it?"

"Robin, we just don't know yet."

"I *am* rejecting. I can feel it. Touch my kidney—see how big it is?" She held my hand in her fat little-girl hand with chipped pink nail polish and a clammy palm, and she set my hand on her lower belly, atop the incision, where I could feel the bulge of the graft. It was almost as if I fingered the bruised, swollen thing itself, battered by angry blood that swirled through it, a dangerous, foreign object, under siege.

"What are you going to *do*?" she screamed. Tommy laid down his sketchpad and looked across at us, with a kind of satisfaction, it seemed. "What if I lose it? I don't want to lose it. Do *something*!"

"Take it easy," I said.

Her father followed me into the hall.

"You know, in San Francisco," he said, "the way they treat rejection is . . ."

"I can't talk right now," I said.

I found Raphael in the Conference Room, smoking. There were bits of tobacco in his beard.

"I can't believe those damn people."

"What's going on?"

"She's rejecting and they're all going crazy."

"Robin?" he said. He looked startled, as if about to cry. Then he recovered. He dug into his old army knapsack and came up with some grubby sheets of paper, a handout entitled *Immunosuppressive Therapy Following Kidney Transplantation*. "Here we go," he said. " 'Pediatric patient, rejection treatment, first episode.' We can calculate out the doses. How many kilos does she weigh?"

We began the rejection treatment. Nothing grew from the blood cultures. The urine, when it came, was clear, and the x-rays were negative; and after a few days, her creatinine, which had risen from 0.7 to 3.5, began to fall. Her fevers abated, and her urine output rose from practically nothing to a hundred cc's a day. After two weeks, when her output hit half a liter, her parents, who had been hovering around Robin's bed day and night, hardly going to their hotel room, took a plane back to Arizona. Robin shone again. She wore a gauzy new nightgown and a bathrobe bright with parrots and jungle foliage. She wrote to her class in Scottsdale, she began *Hard Times* for her English class, she interviewed me for her school newspaper ("How did you decide you wanted to be a doctor? Are you especially interested in kidneys?"). She would walk down the hall in her bathrobe, the apparatus for her foley catheter in a shopping bag at her side, her big pale feet in fluffy slippers; she'd come and sit with us in the Intensive Care Unit, or lean over the counter at the nurses' station, until I came by. Then she'd look embarrassed, and after a few minutes would say she had something to do in her room, and shuffle back down the hall.

Beside her, Tommy Tomano's output continued to drop, and he got accustomed to going to dialysis three times a week; his mother, now out of the hospital, would come and sit silently by his bed. In the other corner, Karen Liebowitz became stiff and weird, throwing food off her tray. The other Intern did a spinal tap, which grew Listeria Meningides. And Donna developed pneumonia.

The room filled with IV bottles, plastic tubing, boxes of gauze pads and plastic syringes, and nurses working extra shifts. We spent half of morning Rounds there. Yet much of the time was passed around Robin's bed. Raphael would come by every few hours to check her output, I would come into the room to see how she was doing and find the other Interns there, holding her blood pressure chart in their hands or sitting in the chair at her bedside; and the day she hit eleven hundred cc's, we were all in there, Raphael hefting his fat body onto the edge of her bed, and sighing, like he often did, mornings before his cigarette and coffee.

"I think we've got it licked," he said.

* * *

At midnight that night when I came by, the kids were all still awake. Tommy and Donna were sitting around Karen's bed, sharing a box of chocolate chip cookies brought in by the Liebowitzes. Robin's curtain was pulled closed.

"You want a cookie?" Karen asked.

"No thanks."

"Your little friend's not feeling so good," she said. The three of them started laughing.

"You'll get fat if you keep eating those," I said.

On the other side of the curtain, Robin lay covered in blankets, so just her face and her knuckles were visible. She was shivering.

"Hi, kid, how're you doing?"

Beneath my hand, her forehead radiated a fury of heat.

"It's happening again," she said. She began crying.

"Damn!" I said, which didn't help much. I sat down on the bed, wondering. How could any surgeon be crazy enough to cut a kidney out of some motorcycle-riding kid who smashed his skull and slice another kid open and sew that kidney inside, and how could anyone be so full of daring and brazen foolishness to think the kidney would work? There was no question about it—the whole idea was insane. And most bizarre and perverse about it was that sometimes—not often maybe, but sometimes—the complications passed and the miracle remained. Anyhow, that was the story you heard, that was what the textbooks said.

"Look, Robin, don't worry. We'll get it working again. It'll just be a couple of days."

"I don't want to go on dialysis again. I'd rather be dead."

"I said we'll get it working again."

"What are you going to do? Are you going to take more blood? Do you need another x-ray? Am I going to get pulsed again?"

"Robin, let me be the doctor, okay?"

"You don't understand. You don't know how horrible it is—I just never know what's going to happen next."

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From the nurses' station I phoned Raphael. His wife answered, and said she'd get him; finally he came to the phone and dully said hello, and I told him what was happening; but he seemed drowned in a lubberly morass of sleep, and I had to repeat three times what was going on before he seemed to get it.

"Oh . . . oh hell," he said. "Look at that . . . that handout again. The second rejection episode in the pediatric patient. It's like last time; just give twice as much prednisone."

"Isn't that a lot?"

"That's what we give. Got it?"

"Okay."

I could hear his wife in the background, telling him to come back to bed. He sighed.

"Give me a call if you have troubles."

When the medication came up from the pharmacy, in a fifty-cc glass syringe, I brought it into the kids' room and sat beside Robin's bed and pushed it in slowly through a butterfly. She had stopped crying by then, and when I left to work up my new admissions, she was sitting up, staring across the room, where that little troll Donna Green lay tangled in plastic tubing.

At two in the morning, a nurse came into the Conference Room, where I was lying on a cot, trying to sleep.

"What is it?"

"Robin fell out of bed. I think you should see her."

"Fell? How'd that happen?" I reached for my glasses and pulled a white coat over my greens; then I stuffed my feet into my shoes and dazedly followed her down the hall.

Robin was already back in bed. Her big pale legs were out of the covers, her nightgown was twisted. She breathed strangely—too loud, forcedly—and there was blood on her arm where the IV had been pulled loose. I shook her and called her name, but she hardly responded. With thumb and forefinger, I opened her eyes—they were unfocussed, beingless. A groan, a guttural animal noise came from her, and suddenly her arms thrashed up at me, driving my glasses against my eyes. I pushed her arms away.

I looked across the bed at the nurse.

"What the hell happened?"

"I don't know. The aide came in to take her temperature and she was on the floor."

Now I saw her front teeth were slick with blood. And a lump was at her right temple. For all I knew she could be bleeding into her brain.

And then, unseen strings twitched and jerked her arms, like the limbs of a marionette, and her legs went too, and then the trembling went through the whole of her, so she arched back into the pillow, gasping, and a horrible, ruddy, inhuman mask replaced her face.

"Oh, Christ!" I said. She was seizing. I stood like a block of wood, as if all the medicine I had ever learned had been shaken loose from my mind, and all I could do was be there forever watching her choke on her tongue. Finally the nurse pulled a plastic airway from where it was taped to the wall, and jammed it into Robin's mouth, twisting it past her teeth.

Then I was able to act.

"She's in status—get me ten of Valium. Come on, *move.*"

* * *

She kept me awake the whole night. Five more times she seized, and I kept pushing medications into her IV lines and sticking needles into veins and arteries for blood and checking the airway and trying to figure out what it was that made her seize. She kept gasping for breath, and the x-ray showed a haze of pneumonia rising in her lungs. I pushed antibiotics and anticonvulsants. We transferred her to the Intensive Care Unit, down at the end of the floor. Raphael came in at three a.m. and stayed two hours; then went back across the street to his wife.

I was sitting in the Conference Room, staring at her chart, when he arrived for morning Rounds.

"There you are," he said. He handed me a paper bag from the deli. "How'd it go after I left?"

Inside the bag was breakfast. I pulled the lid off the cup of coffee and tossed it into the bag and sipped hot, sweet coffee, then I unwrapped white paper to find a bagel, which was spread with cream cheese and warmed by its nearness to the coffee.

"What a night," I said.

"She didn't seize again?"

I shook my head. "Course I wouldn't say she's awake yet either. What do you think did it?"

"Don't know," he said. "Maybe the steroids. Maybe they were just too much for her."

"It doesn't make sense."

"These kids never do," he said. "After they get their transplants, all kinds of crazy things happen."

"God, I don't know about this business."

"I tell you," he said. "If I lost my kidneys, I'd stay on dialysis. The transplant's just too much."

"No kidding," I said. I chewed on the bagel. "Oh—and I stuck myself drawing her blood. A goddamn butterfly. I jabbed it right into my thumb."

"Oh boy. You make sure you get your shots. Hyperimmune globulin. One in each cheek. Hurts like hell."

"Shit."

"Let's go in and see her."

* * *

I don't remember much of that day, except the drowned look of her face, the slow confused way she woke, as if the human districts of her brain had been stunned, bombed, blacked-out, convulsed into silence, leaving her dazed and crocodilian, aware only of heat and pain and the rush of noises around her. I went down to Employee Health and had my blood drawn and was injected twice so I went through the rest of the day dizzy and sick from foreign stuff in my veins; I could barely walk back into the Unit to check her vacant pupils or push medications. It was evening before she could speak, and nearly a week before she stopped moving like someone whose limbs have fallen asleep; and I don't think she ever got it clear in her mind what happened, whether she fell out of bed and then seized, or the other way around. But I do know we did everything possible to save that kidney.

And when I say *we*, I mean not so much the house staff, the Residents and Interns and Fellows, but the faculty members and consultants who generally stay in the background, making brief appearances on the ward two or three times a week and delivering oracular presentations in teaching conferences. Robin's bed was surrounded by them: a few private "slicks" in their five hundred dollar suits, a balding marine of a surgeon in his greens and scuffed tennis shoes, a neurologist with a hand-tooled leather case of pins, vials of cinnamon, fancy reflex hammers, tuning forks, pieces of striped cloth. Any hour of day or night I'd come in and see a few of them at the foot of her bed, or examining her belly or talking transplants and organ banks

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Do you know these people?

If so, then you understand the need to preserve our natural resources for future generations. For your own children and for theirs. They will need the same things we do—clean air and water and a healthy place to live. We can provide them for our children only if we're smart enough now not to spoil what we have. Remember the future. Your kids may need it someday.

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with her father. Robin was first on the list for renal scans whenever she needed one, and somehow room was found for her on the plasmapheresis machine, which was supposed to be for research subjects only. Raphael joked that it was because they were worried Robin's father wouldn't donate to the Kidney Center if she lost it.

Despite it all, her output slowly dropped. The renal scans showed fewer and fewer dots in the left lower belly, and she began to be sent—twice a week—to the Dialysis Center. She cried every time they wheeled her down the hall, and while she was in there, her mother would be with her, and her father would stand out in the hallway, blankly looking out over the East River. And every day I checked the whites of my own eyes, and my own skin, because the shots did not always work.

By the time she was transferred out of Intensive Care, back to her old bed, the room was empty. Donna Green's pneumonia had faded and her kidney still worked—she went home to Yonkers; Tommy Tomano's kidney barely kept him off dialysis, yet it did not fail—he went back to Jersey; and even Karen Liebowitz's meningitis seemed to resolve, and she was sent out to Long Island with her family. For a day or two the other beds were empty, and then because the transplant business was slow, dialysis patients with complications came in. There was one old woman who needed a tune-up of her blood pressure, and two young girls, one with peritonitis and another with a clotted fistula. Robin kept her curtains pulled most of the time.

One afternoon Raphael and I went down to Radiology to check the day's renal scans, and found Robin there. The dye had already been injected, and the technician moved the huge sensing apparatus into place over her; on the television monitors by the computer, bursts of dots began to appear.

"It hurts," Robin said. "I can't stand this thing lying on top of me."

I put my hand on her shoulder. The machine was hardly touching her. I said, "Hold still, Robin."

"Come here," said Raphael, and motioned me out of the room. We could still see the monitors, and from a distance you could see where the kidney should be, where on the first days we had seen bright rushes of dots. The radiologist came by.

"You see that—an empty space there?" he said. "Even less absorption than the surrounding area?"

It looked like a hole in the body, like a dark spot in a galaxy, a place too dense for light to escape.

"Yeah, what does that mean?"

"That there's not any blood flow through the kidney. And the kidney's swollen enough that it presses down and there's less blood flow even behind it. It's called a negative image."

"And?"

The technician was guiding the sensing apparatus, a huge metal cylinder, off Robin. She lay there rigidly, as if it hurt just to breathe. The technician wheeled a gurney into the room.

"It's a surgical emergency," the radiologist said. "It's got to come out."

Raphael was already paging the surgeons. In a few minutes they were there.

* * *

She was back on the floor by mid-afternoon, paler than ever, with a white dressing taped over her wound. Her strawberry-blonde hair was spread out on the pillow and her eyes were closed and her cracked lips were as pale as her eyelashes, and for a moment it seemed that her face disappeared, and there was only a pink, featureless shell, like the woman I used to know, who closed her eyes in a different kind of abandon. But there seemed more gray to Robin now, as if she had been finely coated with dust.

Her father sat in the chair by the side of the bed. He had been crying.

"All I wanted to do was give her a couple of years," he said. "So she wouldn't stop growing yet, so she'd have a chance to be normal for a little while. She's a great kid."

"She's something," I said.

"She's a great kid. It's just not fair." And he was crying again.

Within a week she was up again, hobbling back and forth in the hall, playing cards with the nurses—half-heartedly, true, but playing. She had a regular slot at the Dialysis Center by now, and every Monday, Wednesday and Friday would shuffle down the corridor to the room of gray people. One afternoon she even went out with her parents, to Bloomingdale's and to the top of the World Trade Center.

The day she was to leave I went to find her, but her bed was empty and her parents were in her room, throw-

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ing flowers into a huge plastic garbage bag. I found her in the Dialysis Center. She was wearing jeans and cowboy boots, and a new shirt (from Bloomingdale's?), and the needles in her fistula were circulating her bright red blood through the machine. At her side Tommy Tomano was standing; looking perhaps a little less gray than he had on the ward; in fact, when I looked from Robin to Tommy, it was disturbing to observe that she was the grayer of the two.

"Hi," said Robin. "You know what, doctor? Tommy, tell him."

"Karen Liebowitz died," Tommy said.

"You're kidding."

"They found her at home and she was dead," said Robin.

"Her mother found her," said Tommy.

"What happened?"

"I don't know. I don't think they know. They found her in the living room and they thought she was asleep but she was dead. Her kidney was still working but she died."

"Tommy's kidney is still working," Robin said.

"No kidding," I said. "That's great."

"And so is Donna Green's," Robin said. The dialysis nurse turned some knobs on the machine, and, wearing gloves, pulled the big needles from Robin's arm. Robin put pressure on the wounds with her hand.

"That's two out of four," Robin said.

"That's one way of looking at it," I said.

"What do you mean?" Robin said. "You know, I'm going to get another one. I'm going back to Arizona until I get back to normal, and then my father's going to put me on the list again. I'm going to come back here, too, next time." She sat up and gingerly swung her legs off the side of the bed. For a moment I was afraid she'd black out. Then the color came back to her face, and she smiled at me, the way I imagine Daisy Buchanan must have smiled in her time for Gatsby.

Robin's parents came to the door then, dressed, as always, for the golf course.

"Come on, Robin," said her father.

She eased off the bed, still almost smiling.

"And next time it's going to work," she said. —*David Hellerstein*

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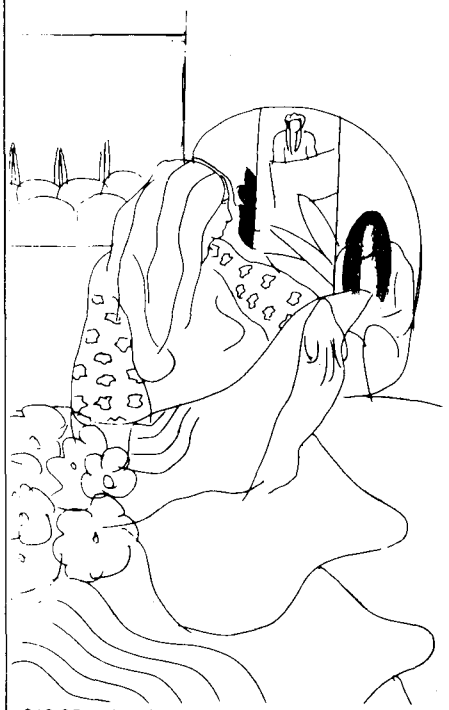

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Everywhere the poor fish
became poorer.

The military
divided up his money
fundamentalists
his mind
governments embezzled
his rights
television
deformed his dreams.
That left, as ever,
drugs. Things went better
with coke.

A young IRA man, afflicted with red carbuncles, tossed painfully in his sleep, dreaming of potatoes and old men their endless stories of fast and famine the Irish hunger . . . the children, the martyrs, the red fire and awoke with a start bang in the middle of revelation if starvation's your history, use it "The sainted stuff's explosive," he yelled arose from his bed and went out into the street calling for volunteer fuses

Elsewhere
Ayotallah parts
were cheap. In South America
jailors played electric train
with prisoners' testicles.
Peace in the U.S.
which is being run
like a bank. Europe
sent its huddled masses
of money. Housing
was down, tax shelter
up. All was computation.
An economic visionary
suggests we buy Russia
the cost about equal
to war (amortized)
and we come out on the deal
by selling off the satellites.

Harold Havemeyer neatly teaches mechanical drawing at a community college out on the prairie Driving into town on a Friday night he's tailgated shoved and taunted by two boys-will-be-boys in a jacked-up fat-tired Ford-mobile with the radio blaring (I'll love you till I die/and then some) finally pulling alongside and forcing him off the road into some trees. He misses the trees, coming to a stop surrounded by them, hardly able to believe he got in there without hitting anything "A miracle" he thinks, then begins to shake When he finally stops shaking he feels a terrible need to take a leak and despite all the trees he stumbles toward a metal fence because that's the kind of caring fellow he is and unzips, he says, and prepares to piss and the next thing he knows he's flat on his back as if hit by a giant hammer A passing farmer takes him to a hospital, where he wakes to find he hurts all over and has a black and blue streak up and down his middle because, he's informed, he damnfool peed against an electrified fence He dined out at the Rotary Club on his story, where everybody laughed except one old man at the end of the table, who turned and said to his neighbor, "In the old country, half of these kids would've been drowned by their parents"

The son of Oral Roberts
was charged with forging prescriptions,
the son of an oilman
shot the President.
So much for affluent nurture.
As for nature
it lost another one
to the glamor of science—
designer genes.
The American dream of *more*
foundering on future fact
was set right again by Watt
in the Conservation James version
which, seeing The End as Near,
deduced it's only sensible
to eat up.
The poor fish
uninvited to this elaborate
Last Supper
marched on Washington
under a banner borrowed
from Poland. The irony
was lost upon them.

Somewhere in New Jersey a young fellow set up a satellite receiver in his backyard mounted on wheels so it can be turned to target all the senders up there in space thus freeing him from earthly alphabetical limits he receives, twenty-four hours a day seven days a week "between 80-200 stations, worldwide" "Suddenly it's three in the morning," he says, his wife and two children grouped around him as for a family portrait but in this instance *looking* at a picture, "and there's this other really interesting program coming on" . . . as dawn breaks we see on his television set, plain as life, a commercial for Colgate in French

Who would propose that affluence
is bad for us?
That when people are merely better off
they behave worse?
That when children have nothing
of importance to do
they spoil?
That somehow the world
and all of us in it
are running out of
significance.

–Kenneth Lash

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In Search of Noah

For the past three years I have been collecting the artistic record of Noah and his voyage. Others can trek to Turkey and climb mountains which may or may not be Ararat and photograph rotting planks which may or may not be historically significant. My concern has been for those old etchings and woodcuts which record the construction, the loading, the time at sea, and the aftermath.

It all started with a novel I was writing. *Surviving the Flood** is a now-it-can-be-told account of the entire Ark voyage as reported by Ham, the youngest son and last surviving witness. (The book is listed as fiction at the insistence of my publishers, for Lord only knows how many descendants there are by now, each with his or her own version of what happened, and no publisher wants to risk *that* flood of libel suits. But off the record I can assure you that it is all the gospel truth.) The decision to add illustrations came well after the novel had been launched. It was not because I was handy with pen and ink—the only skill I have with paper is feeding it into a typewriter—but for generations the story of the Ark has been the concern of wood carvers and etchers. Collecting prints became for me a counterpoint to writing. I ended up with about forty of them, many included in the novel.

Since the prints are secondary—even peripheral—to the novel itself, I sometimes hesitate to give them more attention than they deserve. Mine is not, after all, an illustrated book for coffee tables; it is a novel with illustrations. But the search for prints became an adventure in itself. It introduced me to a network of principalities on the outer fringe of the art world and brought me to corners of New York City rarely visited.

* * *

My search began in the bookstores of lower Manhattan. Many are clustered in a six-block area on or near Fourth Avenue from Cooper Square to 14th Street. It is a shabby area, just up from the Bowery, but there are more old volumes to be found there than anywhere else in the country.

Illustrated Bibles, I discovered, were popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. Hardly portable, they tended to be the size of unabridged dictionaries. Some of them were intended for church use and today are in private collections or libraries; the New York Public Library, for example, has more than 300 of these more elegant Bibles—mostly in dead storage. The great majority, however, were in the homes of average citizens—standard equipment along with *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Such a Bible tended to remain in a single family as long as it was church-attending and relatively fixed. But the twentieth century brought for some a less literal view of that work and a good deal of moving about. Further, with the advent of radio and then television, reading aloud faded as a widespread American practice. So did the popularity of large Bibles. As a result, second-hand bookstores are today overstocked with them. Their prices decline as the paper—excellent by today's standards—gradually deteriorates.

I soon discovered that although most of these works contain illustrations, they are a poor source for any collector with specific needs. Even a 2,000-page volume normally has only one illustration for each Biblical story. Noah might be graced with a storm-tossed Ark or a parade of animals or a rainbow, but never all three. One little etching hardly justified buying the entire volume.

Since many print collectors have equally specialized interests, the trade has encouraged what is known as *breakers*. The breaker (also called a *vandal)* is one who buys old volumes and cuts out the illustrations to be sold separately.

Many look on breakers as one rung below grave robbers. Books, goes the argument, are sacred even when not Biblical. But the fact is that no book is ever broken if there is the slightest chance that someone might be willing to purchase it whole. Those which are dismembered are usually incomplete, beyond repair, and are on their way to the dump. Saving the illustrations strikes me as preferable to total destruction.

Since these terms are pejorative, most dealers describe themselves as being in the book and print business. One of the best of these in New York is Mr. Sid Solomon. He and his two daughters, Shirley and Rebecca, run the Pageant Book and Print Shop on East 9th Street. In business since 1945, Solomon has amassed an impressive collection of prints on almost every topic. They are arranged in bins, shelves, and folders, and are protected with clear plastic covers. These are not limited editions, generally, but etchings which were printed in books published mostly in the 19th and 18th centuries and occasionally as early as the 15th. The earlier works are rare and expensive, but it is still possible to buy an 18th century etching in good condition for less than twelve dollars.

Unlike librarians, the Solomons have no Dewey Decimal System or Library of Congress Catalogue to guide them. Instead, they have relied on Mr. Solomon's own infinite wisdom which has produced over the years what can best be described as the *Ad Hoc* classification. Take animals, for example: small ones are in a cabinet in the front room, large ones on a shelf in the back room; horses are of course separate, as are dogs. And be sure to check "Africa."

As for birds, there is no greater aviary in all of Manhattan. The main collection is in three drawers in the front room carefully marked "Ornithology (Boids)."

The problem is to keep from straying from one's own area. Under "Mechanics" and "Engineering" one can find literally thousands of detailed 18th and early 19th century etchings illustrating almost every kind of mechanical device then known: paper-making machines, horse-run threshing machines, pumps, under-sea diving equipment, sewer designs, railroad tunnels, techniques of casting large bells, castration devices (15 different methods), and ingenious, hand-held tools whose function will forever be lost.

Beyond that, slightly to the left of "Christian" and across the aisle from "Steamships," is "Judaic." That's where the Old Testaments of broken Bibles go, along with etchings from a great variety of less holy sources. It

*Published in September by Atheneum

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was there that I found, mixed in with religious work, two French 18th century, hand-colored prints entitled "The Hebrew Gentleman," jolting samples of antisemitism.

Large as the "Judaic" bin is, it does not contain a single print of Noah or his Ark or his sons and animals. Not now. Mr. Solomon was my best source and I did my best to clean out his supply.

* * *

There remained a problem I hadn't considered. The great majority of my prints illustrated the building of the Ark and the landing. I needed more about the voyage itself, the subject of my account. And I also needed at least one depicting one of the more unsavory aspects of that entire saga—the scene after the landing when Noah drinks far too much and falls asleep naked. Since his son, Ham, was roundly cursed for not handling that situation in the correct manner, I needed at least one reference to it in art. Needless to say, Bibles tended to skirt that aspect of the account.

For this and interior details I turned to the New York Public Library. I had remembered it from years ago as impressive and invulnerable, itself a kind of Ark in the midst of political and fiscal storms. Impressive it still was, but sadly vulnerable.

Skirting the fleet-footed marijuana dealers on the front steps, I entered the 42nd Street entrance and was faced with a sign saying "Closed for Lack of Heat." Fortunately that referred only to a first-floor reading room, but it was discouraging to see plastic sheeting covering all the books there in an apparent attempt to protect them against plumbing leaks and to see librarians working in overcoats.

I picked up the red in-house telephone which used to be a handy way to receive library information. It was dead. I was told by the security guard (himself a new development) that it had been broken—"permanently."

The main catalogue room, however, was much as I had remembered it. I began with the file under *Bible*. The choice was overwhelming: one entire drawer was devoted to that single title.

Many of the cards were over a century old—handwritten in pencil on yellowed cardboard. Only a skilled librarian can decipher the unique call numbers. In fact, the entire drawer has to be carried to an expert since a dot or dash often has great significance. I was told that my first four choices were buried in some warehouse elsewhere in the city and if I wished to have them exhumed I should allow the library at least three working days. So much for a start.

My next choice, I was told, was in the Print Room. That sounded like a good lead. Where was the Print Room?

"Oh, you can't go there," I was told. "It's restricted."

The librarian quickly turned to another patron—one with less peculiar needs. I almost gave up, but then it occurred to me that "restricted" didn't mean "nonexistent." It must mean that it was restricted *for* some as well as against others.

I wandered the halls, longing for the security of that little red telephone from days of yore, asking bookish-looking individuals where the Print Room was. I finally found it, but my sense of achievement was short-lived. The door was locked. I rang the bell; eventually a panel swung open at eye level. A gray face stared at me through the kind of mesh used in prisons and violent wards.

I was not invited in. Instead, I had to describe my quest through the wire. There was no telling for sure which of us was the prisoner.

Little hope was given for my ever entering the Print Room in this lifetime, but I could appeal to the master of passes in still another section of the library. I began to feel a strong kinship for Kafka's K.

The master of passes, it turned out was civil but cautious and probing. In five minutes of conversation he had discovered where I had gone to college, where I had done my graduate work, when I had married, where I lived, and what I had written. Finally I was issued a parchment-colored card which turned out to be a kind of talisman for the next few weeks. I was now a member of the élite which never sets foot in the main reading room.

I was welcomed into the Print Room with a nod of recognition such as is given senior trustees at the Harvard Club. The only difference was that the door was locked and bolted behind me. Still, one soon forgets that he is essentially a prisoner. The room is beautifully paneled and hushed. It is occupied by the Keeper of Prints and her assistant. Only once was I forced to share that elegant environment with another patron.

Being served in the Print Room is to step into an earlier century. You whisper your needs to the assistant and then wait for the volume to be brought to you, sitting at a leather-topped table. The curator silently mounts the stairs to the mezzanine balcony which runs around all four walls. The books are contained in shelves behind large glass doors. You cannot help watching with awed fascination as your dutiful servant circles that balcony guided by what must be mystical vibrations. Without recourse to any numbering system apparent to mere mortals, he stops at the correct spot, removes from his belt an enormous ring of keys, opens the glass door, and removes the book.

Anxious as I was to appear worthy of this attention, I did have a problem in that I didn't want to *read* any of these illustrated volumes. I merely wanted to search for prints which might conceivably be photographed—though introducing such a modern device into this room seemed increasingly out of the question. I soon found that it took more time to locate each request and have it deliv-

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ered than it did for me to skim through its illustrations and determine that it was of no use to me. More conventional patrons doubtless spent days studying a single work, analyzing the illuminations, sleuthing obscure artists. Yet here I was consuming these 18th and 17th century volumes as if they were comic books. Such was the aura of the place that I felt obliged to spend time running my eyes over old Dutch and medieval Latin as if I were a master of antique languages.

It became increasingly apparent that I would not find what I was looking for in the Print Room. Moving on, I discovered that my card served as entree into the locked confines of a number of other special collections. Each had its own cataloging system, its own rules and hours, and its special aura. By far the most impressive, however, was the Rare Book Room, where the magic of my talisman was pushed to its limit. The Keeper of Rare Books was hesitant at first, but finally unlocked the door and quickly locked it after me.

Again, I ordered marvelous books—books even older and more beautiful than those in the Print Room. I could tell when I had selected a true treasure because it was served on a little velvet cradle so that its binding would not have to suffer the indignity of being opened fully on a bare table.

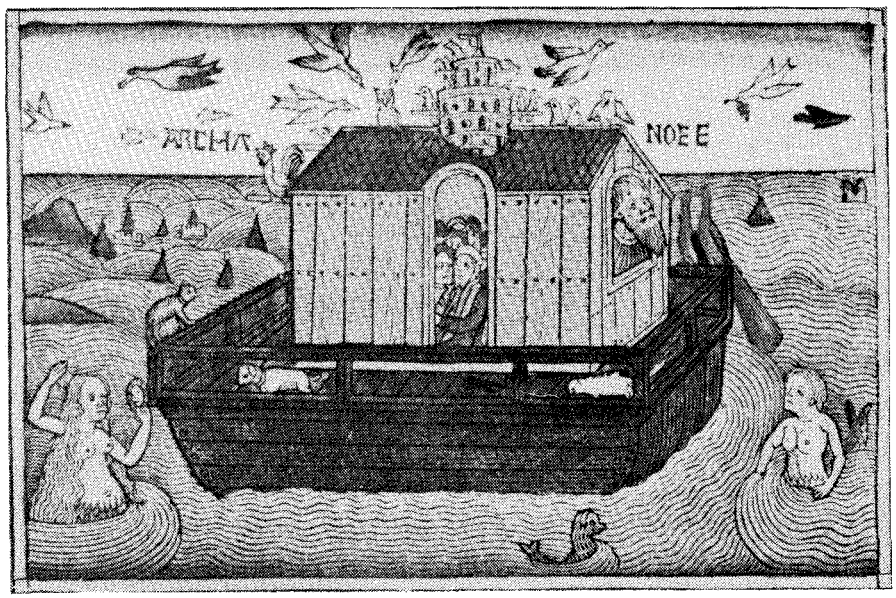
* * *

The celestial heights of the Rare Book Room were heady indeed, but unproductive. The best prints of Noah and his ship and crew were in quite another section of the library. Down in the bowels—just off the 42nd Street entrance—is the Picture Collection. This is as far from the Print and Rare Book rooms as the Captain's suite on a grand old liner was from steerage. The Picture Collection is a bustling, humid, noisy basement quarter filled with students, ad men, commercial artists, teachers, and a number of people who must have wandered in from a Fellini film. Almost every seat is taken and every inch of table space is layered with stacks of prints being pored over by avid collectors.

The personnel here are hearty, direct, and enthusiastic.

"Noah? Like we've got thousands. You'll love 'em."

Sure enough. Dog eared, creased,



some of them simply torn from magazines, others marked with crayon. They had thousands.

Surprisingly, mixed in with a great clutter of material suitable only for the youngest level of Sunday School classes, they had four absolute gems—two of them excellent photographs of 15th century mosaics which I had seen nowhere else. These I leased for a fee and had photographed. They appear in the novel with special thanks to that beleaguered old institution.

Combining the prints I had bought with those I had leased from the library gave me an excellent base. But I was still missing certain aspects of the voyage. Reluctantly I turned to a third source: private archives. Archives such as these do not sell prints. They lease them out. In this respect they are like the library, but their fee scale is in a different dimension.

The largest private collection of prints in New York is The Bettmann Archive. It is also the most expensive.

To begin with, Bettmann charges $35 simply to see what prints they have in a particular area. Once you make your selections, you are charged on the basis of various factors, such as the type of copyright your book will have, how large each published print will be, and where in the book each will be placed. Suppose, for example, you wanted a single print for use in a book which you planned to publish in the United States only. You could reproduce it on a full page for $60. But if you hoped to have that volume also printed by a Canadian publisher (as most novels are), the price would jump to $85. And if you were fairly certain that the work would be reprinted by British and European publishers, you would have to pay $165 for the use of that same print.

But in most cases there is no way of knowing whether a book published in this country will attract a European publisher. This presents a gambler's dilemma because if you have not initially paid Bettmann Archives for what is called world rights and the book is later accepted for publication abroad, Bettmann then charges a penalty rate, country by country. My publisher and I are sharing these expenses and have reluctantly agreed not to secure world rights. This will save money initially, but it means that if publishers in, say, Holland and Denmark wish to publish the book in translation at some future date, I may have to refuse. The relatively modest return for publication in the smaller European countries would not cover the fees and penalties we would have to pay for the use of Bettmann's prints.

The above figures apply only if you plan to reproduce the prints in black and white and to bury each in the midst of a chapter. The world rights for a print in color which also serves as a chapter opener jumps the fee to $275. And if you want to use it on the cover, the price is $600.

All this becomes more astonishing when you realize that Bettmann Archives has no copyright control over their prints. What they lease out is in the public domain. The entire enterprise is based on the simple fact that you cannot see what they have until

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you agree in writing to adhere to their fee schedule for as long as your book is in print.

Needless to say, there develops within the writer a certain poker-player's passion for beating the system. And although the odds are distinctly in favor of the house, the print collector is not without a few tricks of his own.

The cover for *Surviving the Flood* is an example. Bettmann has the print we planned to use. Were we to have selected that print, rendered it in color for use on the cover, and secured even our limited rights, Bettmann Archives would have charged us $600. And there would have been additional charges for each European edition. Fortunately, however, my editor had bought that print for his wife at the Harvard Coop years ago, so we are using it for nothing.

Located on 57th Street, Bettmann Archive consciously adopts the modern elegance of the more exclusive galleries on that street. The woman who helped me looked and sounded as if she had just stepped out of a BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice*. Yes, of course they had many superb prints of the Noah saga if I would just be kind enough to wait. I did so at a large, polished, mahogany table. When she returned with the file, I spread the prints out as if dealing with jewels.

Needless to say, the selections were kept to a minimum. But there were four which were essential. One, a Doré etching, looked familiar; but I knew I didn't own it personally and we were at the point of making final decisions. In fact, my editor wanted the completed list that afternoon by 5:30. I included the Doré print even though it put us distinctly over budget.

I left the elegant aura of the Bettmann office at 3:00 and stepped into raw, sleety weather which already looked like night—New York at its worst. There was time, I decided, to try Culver Pictures, Bettmann's only real competitor. Over on First Avenue, it is the antithesis of Bettmann Archive. An upstairs warehouse, it is a dark cavern of a place lined to the ceiling with overflowing metal racks. If there was a system to their arrangement, it was known only by Harriet Culver, the daughter of the founder.

Noah? The Bible Noah? Oh, yes, somewhere. She consulted with others and a dented 12-foot ladder was dragged out. There, close to the metal embossed ceiling, was a carton which did not seem to have been dusted for at least a decade.

It was close to closing time. Harriet Culver urged me to stay. I worked under a bare bulb while she sorted photographs of silent film actresses, a specialty not shared by Bettmann.

In the file I discovered a two-page spread of the Ark's deck plan—each stall and grain bin, each barrel and corridor seen both in bird's-eye view and in architectual rendering. This deck was for carnivorous animals. Another page revealed the deck for birds. The original set—18th century Dutch—must have included many decks. It was a beautiful find, but far too detailed to be reduced to book size. And of course unavailable except for publication.

More profitable, however, was the discovery that they had the same Doré print which I had ordered from Bettmann. And at about half the price. I hurriedly signed for the print while Harriet Culver threw the master switch for the lights and we groped our way down the warehouse stairs, locking fire doors behind us.

It was then 4:45, black as night, and sleeting. With difficulty I found a street phone which worked and called Bettmann Archives, checking behind me periodically as one does on First Avenue. That Jane Austen voice drifted over the wires as if from an English garden party. Yes, she did remember me, vaguely; yes, it just might be possible to cancel the Doré print order; but was I quite sure I had made up my mind? *Quite* sure?

Yes, I was quite sure. But as I hung up I recalled one more source which had been recommended to me by a friend who had worked with prints for many years: Dover Publications.

Dover is known to most people for their mail-order business. They print their own paperback books, many of them reprints of art collections. The volumes are new but often surprisingly inexpensive.

Luckily for me, Dover remained open until 5:30. Jogging through the sleet, I made it to an avenue reputable enough for cabs and persuaded one ("I'm on my way home, Mac.") to take me downtown as a kind of favor. He wanted to know why the hell they sent me out so close to quitting time and I had difficulty explaining how the self-employed have no quitting time.

"Crazy," he said. I was inclined to agree.

Dover is to the publishing world what Harry's Bare-Rack Clothiers for Gents is to the world of fashion. If you can find a volume in their metal racks and you have the money, they'll let you have it. But if it is eight feet up, it's up to you to find a ladder. (I am, perhaps, being unkind. It was, after all, ten minutes to closing time on a miserable Friday afternoon. The entire retail floor was being handled by a single woman who had remained on duty like the senior officer on a sinking ship.)

It was then that I discovered one of Dover's special gifts to the publishing and advertising worlds. It prints whole volumes of etchings which are in the public domain. There, for example, was *Animals: 1419 Copyright-Free Illustrations of Mammals, Birds, Fish, Insects, Etc. from Nineteenth-Century Sources*. Not exactly great art, but several of the creatures looked as if they would be at home in my Ark. And another volume contained 19th and 18th century cuts "For Collage and Illustration" including superb etchings of skulls, bats, tatooed wrestlers, musical instruments, a mechanical rabbit (showing clockworks), a hand-cranked flying machine, and a display of northern lights. There was also an enraged lion which was far superior to the stately sort offered by Bettmann.

I was being asked to make my decision and pay up, but I was perched on top of a ladder and she had no easy way to get me down. It was there that I discovered what I had never seen before: Dover's own volume entitled *The Doré Bible Illustrations:* 241 plates by Gustave Doré reproduced in superb fidelity.

Sure enough, there was the very etching which Bettmann had been so happy to let me borrow for $110 and Culver for $60. Retail price for the entire Dover collection of 241 Doré prints: $6.00. Actual price, because of a creased back cover: $4.80 plus tax.

Print collecting is not so subtle an activity as writing fiction, but it does provide regular exercise and a certain sense of adventure. —*Stephen Minot*

Lawrence Sturhahn, the NAR's regular film correspondent, will absent himself from these pages for the next several months to work on fiction.

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Decadent Style

People think of decadence in two ways—as a social phenomenon or as an esthetic definition. Often the two become confused. Sometimes they become so entangled that frustrated commentators simply recommend abandoning the term completely. That is hasty, since we cannot at the same time abandon the concepts that the word has labored to contain. Instead, we must try to refine our definition of the term and make it refer to precise things. Perhaps one way of limiting the meaning of the word *decadence* is to show how it may be as useful a descriptive term in the arts as such other general terms as *impressionism* or *naturalism*.

Decadence in art may be seen as style, material, and milieu. The easiest to consider is style, since it is technical and therefore traceable. The central quality of decadent style is implicit in the word's etymology. It involves a *falling away* from some established norm. The decadent work of art does not boldly assert a new form against a presiding standard; it elaborates an existing tradition to the point of apparent dissolution. It is a heresy within the faith, not a rebellion against it. Decadent art is self-conscious. It knows what it is doing to its host form and sometimes manifests that self-consciousness as self-parody. While a decadent work of art may parasitically alter a traditional form, it does not reject all form. In fact, it exalts it. Decadent art is transformational and therefore likely to flourish when esthetic and cultural standards are challenged or in flux. The best example that we have of such a period in western culture is what is called the *fin de siècle*. The best locale for this period is Paris, where, very conveniently, some artists willingly accepted the term *decadent* to describe their work, and where the term, applied to artists who did not necessarily welcome it, was satisfactorily defined at a very early stage.

As early as 1883, Paul Bourget described the decadent style in Baudelaire's work.

> A decadent style is one where the unity of the book decomposes in order to give place to the independence of the page, where the page decomposes in order to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase in order to give place to the independence of the word.

Even earlier, Theophile Gautier offered a more elaborate description of Baudelaire's style, tinting it in the process with the confusing association of cultural decline.

> It is an ingenious, complex, learned style, full of shades and refinements of meaning, ever extending the bounds of language, borrowing from every technical vocabulary, taking colours from every palette and notes from every keyboard; a style that endeavours to express the most inexpressible thoughts, the vaguest and most fleeting contours of form, that listens, with a view to rendering them, to the subtile confidences of neurosity, to the confessions of aging lust turning into depravity, and to the odd hallucinations of fixed ideas passing into mania. This decadent style is the final expression of the Word which is called upon to express everything, and which is worked for all it is worth.

Later, Havelock Ellis condensed these definitions in his own essay on Huysmans. "Technically," he wrote, "a decadant style is only such in relation to a classic style. It is simply a further development of a classic style, a further specialization, the homogeneous, in Spenserian phraseology, having become heterogeneous. The first is beautiful because the parts are subordinated to the whole; the second is beautiful because the whole is subordinated to the parts."

In decadent style, the artist concentrates upon detail, the whole composition coming together as an assembly of these patiently developed elements. I said earlier that decadent art elaborates an existing form to the point of *apparent* dissolution; in fact, a new order arises out of the new method. This is true in literature, art, and music. Let me briefly cite some instances.

Novels such as Huysmans' *A Rebours*, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Jean Lorraine's *Monsieur de Phocas* exhibit this trait. Each chapter of Huysmans' novel takes up a separate subject and examines it in detail. It may be gems, perfumes, flowers, art works, Anglophilia, it doesn't seem to matter. The individual chapters do not advance the story line very much; in fact, they retard it. Finally, the novel seems to be nothing more than a collection of essays, dissolving into a loose federation of *feuilletons*. Wilde's novel is similarly composed, though the traditional narrative is stronger. The set pieces do not break so neatly at chapter divisions, but they are there nonetheless—on art, on the formation of the self, on women, on *A Rebours*. Indeed, a large part of one chapter is given over to a respectful parody of Huysmans' novel. Wilde's novel is even more "dissolved" in a sense, because whereas Huysmans reduces his essays to chapters, Wilde often condenses his to maxims. Lorraine's novel uses the same technique—each chapter or part of a chapter being given over to the elaborate examination of some one subject—eyes, masks, etchings, opium, and so on.

While each of these novels seems to dissolve narrative structure, in fact they are merely reconstituting it, for though the story line is diluted and retarded in each, the details establish reticulations which form a subtler, but more thorough unity, a unity of motif, mood, and theme. In *A Rebours*, for example, each separately elaborated subject restates a consistent theme—the reversal of normal functions. Thus at the outset, a triptich done in a neat missal lettering exhibits the outrageous poems of Baudelaire, while a church vestment becomes a wall hanging. Each chapter describes an attempt by Des Esseintes to excite his senses and to escape the mundane, but reveals instead the failure of the sensuous experiment and the tenacity of the mundane through memory. There are many examples, but one must suffice.

Certain flavors from Des Esseintes' mouth organ of liqueurs revive memories of a visit to the tooth-extractor, memories which conclude in loathsome details—"a blue tooth with a red thread hanging from it," and bloody spittle marking the stairway down from the operator's office. Recalling himself to "everyday matters," Des Esseintes discovers that the turtle whose shell he has had encrusted with precious stones is dead; "it had not been able to support the dazzling splendour imposed upon it. . . ." A jeweled turtle is scarcely an everyday matter, but death and bad teeth are. The memory of the dental extraction calls up the mortification of the turtle. Beneath the artifice with which Des Esseintes diverts himself is still that Nature of pain and death that cannot long be disguised.

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Motifs and repeated themes such as religion, the English, and perverted nature thread through *A Rebours;* different motifs and themes similarly unify *Dorian Gray* and *Monsieur Phocas*. In the latter, eyes recur prominently throughout the novel, often directly or obliquely associated with the famous head of Antinous, itself an icon among decadent writers. Related motifs of masks and *objets d'art* tighten the novel's structure.

* * *

This re-establishing of order through atomization operates in other arts as well. Huysmans said that, in memory, Gustave Moreau's paintings broke up into fragments. And certainly, although Moreau employed traditional schemes for ordering his paintings, that order is often insidiously subverted by his inclusion of powerful symbolic details which become independent centers of energy. The import of *Salomé Dancing before Herod,* for example, is clearer in its symbols than in the action depicted. Salome carries a lotus flower symbolizing sensual pleasure and wears a bracelet adorned with the magical Ujat. Opposite her stands a black panther symbolizing lust as does the peacock-feather fan held by Herodias. Above the apparently senile Herod rises a bold statue of the many-breasted Diana of Ephesus representing fecundity, while on either side of her is a statue of Ahriman, the Persian god of evil. At the far left, a sphinx is pictured gripping the body of a male victim in its claws. Other pictures are based on famous predecessors—*The Suitors* recalls Couture's *Romans of the Decadence,* and *Jupiter and Semele* may have Ingres' *Jupiter and Thetis* as a model—but both are dominated by independent images, some of them so occult as to remain mystifying despite Moreau's own elaborate explanations of his work.

These elaborate explanations are themselves an aspect of what I am calling the decadent style, for they reflect the self-consciousness with which the intellectual content of the paintings was fashioned. The final impact of a Moreau painting is in its color and its elaboration of detail as they manifest an idea, not in the depiction of a real or fanciful object or landscape.

If writers identified with decadence showed a fondness for Moreau's paintings, they were addicted to Wagner, whose art reveals the same traits I have just been describing. Wagner's characteristic method was to break up the usual operatic forms of aria and recitative, the usual harmonic progressions, in favor of an atomized form of significant *leitmotifs*. These motifs, accumulating significance not merely through their patterns of recurrence, but also through their identification with ideas in the text, created an elaborate new musical order depending not only upon auditory response but upon intellectual comprehension as well. An apparent dissolution and atomization of the operatic form resulted in a transformation and a new ordering.

Wagner's music has another curious quality which I consider central to the decadent style. It is the intentional irritation of the senses through violation of expectation. Modulation, suspension, and anticipation are Wagner's means of intriguing, but not satisfying his listener. In a description of *Tristan,* Elliott Zuckerman writes that "modulation or at least transitions of key occur in almost every bar, disguising the four-squareness of the fundamental movement, and providing the effects of unrest and motion forward that represent Isolde's transfiguration." Moreover, on the first page of this music drama, none of the dominant sevenths is resolved, so that in the context of extreme chromaticism we are forced to accept as consonance a chord that ordinarily clamors for resolution. Wagner self-consciously exploited uncertainty of tonality, obliging his listeners to accept his new ordering of musical events.

This tantalization of the senses, this mystification of the intellect by the recurrence of motifs that have a sensuous and an intellectual freight, is characteristic of Huysmans, Wilde, Lorraine, and Moreau as well as Wagner, and reflects a similar aspiration. All of these artists sought to depict, either directly or with some irony, an ideal alternative to the world they saw about them. Des Esseintes' whole effort is to escape a modern world he loathes. Huysmans recognized a similar spirit in Moreau, whose works, he said, are "independent of time, fleeing to the beyond, soaring in a land of dream, far from the excremental ideas secreted by an entire nation."

Gabriele d'Annunzio, in his own decadent novel *Trionfo della Morte,* ably described the effect of Wagner's *Tristan,* which he imitated in his own narrative.

> From the orchestra sang every joy, wept every pain ever expressed by the human voice. The melodies merged into sonorous symphonies, swelled out, broke in on and overlapped one another, mingled, melted, dissolved, and vanished only to re-appear. A strain of trouble and pain growing ever more poignant passed through all the instruments, expressing a continuous and futile effort to reach the unattainable. In the rush of chromatic harmonies there was all the mad pursuit after a prize for ever eluding the grasp although it shone so near. The constant changes of key, of rhythm, of measure, the succession of syncopated phrases, expressed a never-ending, fruitless search, the long torture of desire, burning yet impotent. One theme, symbol of eternal desire, eternally exasperated by delusive hope, returned at every moment with cruel persistency, poignant, imperious; now touching the crests of the waves of sound with dazzling light, now drawing over them a tragic shadow. The terrifying potency of the philtre was doing its work upon the souls and bodies of the lovers, already doomed to death. Nothing could calm or extinguish that fatal fever—nothing short of death.

Through suspensions and modulations, Wagner teased and irritated his listeners' senses; Moreau did the same with unusual coloration and bizarre symbols. Writers also used symbols, and their elaborate and subtle descriptions corresponded to Moreau's coloring. The gradual transformations and interminglings of such recurrent motifs as androgyny, art works, and eyes in Lorraine; religion, sex, and art in Huysmans; art, sin, and self in Wilde, are the equivalents of Wagner's motifs and modulations. But these techniques have an intellectual foundation, and it is here that we reach the boundary between decadent style and the less clearly definable area of decadent material.

Certain themes, while common to all art, are peculiarly associated with decadent art. Among them are: a resistance to nature and a corresponding preoccupation with the unnatural, a yearning after an unattainable ideal coupled with rejection of ordinary existence, a nostalgia for some past excellence, and a fascination with death. In decadent art, these themes are often conveyed with some degree of irreverence. Associated with these themes are certain typical figures such as the de-

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structive woman, the pure child, the criminal, and the esthete. In certain cultural contexts, there is even a consistent iconology associated with these themes and figures such as the sphinx, the chimera, the effeminate male youth, the lily.

* * *

Decadent art is intellectual and self-conscious. Like much modern art, its method reflects its meaning. Thus, because it so often deals with a yearning for some confessedly unattainable object or ideal, it is characterized by a painful awareness, a constant agitation which can be appeased by nothing but death. Following Schopenhauer's observation that the unexpected movement into a remote key is like death, the second and third acts of *Tristan* can be seen to represent a continuous dying. But while this dying is in progress, the listener must attend to each motif with its load of meaning as it appears. He must anatomize decay until the anatomization replaces sensation itself. Cerebration replaces spontaneous feeling. This is why Nietzsche came to despise Wagner and label him decadent.

Yet this is precisely why others enshrined Wagner. Moreau, too, dissolved traditional form by maintaining its appearance while forcing the eye and mind to read his compositions differently. Each symbol, each allusion, each color had its significance, which by its novelty or renovation disturbed the eye into a new awareness, an intellectual awareness. Often Moreau's paintings described actual or implied deaths.

Huysmans was fully conscious of this relationship between import and manner. *A Rebours* begins with Des Esseintes' physical decay, but as each chapter anatomizes one or another appeal to his senses, we realize that the true effect is upon his spirit. In examining each sensory experience, Huysmans (and Des Esseintes) abstracts it, making sensation phantasmal; life retreats to imagination and imagination broods upon disease and decay. While this rondo of etiolation proceeds, a second major theme swells in significance. It is the comparable etiolation of art. Des Esseintes describes how visual and literary arts have executed a similar migration from sensory vividness to intellectual refinement—from Balzac to Mallarmé. Art no longer seeks to depict the world, but to escape it by fashioning an illusory domain of the imagination. It is a doomed gesture resolvable only in defeat or death.

In an early essay on Decadence as he perceived it in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century, Hermann Bahr said of those he classified as decadents: "It is their nature to be unnatural. They cannot do otherwise." These artists have rejected the present, but are smothered by the long tradition of art. They live not in the world of sense, but in the dream-world of art. "The art of the fathers kills the life of the grandchild. He wants to flee from realities. Where? In the soul? But his soul is empty, for he lacks the stuff of the real world: it achieves abundance by living; only he who wakes, can dream."

What I am calling decadent style seems always to be associated with an autumnal, frustrated mood and hence the frequent confusion between cultural decadence and *decadence* as an esthetic term. The former is primarily an historical and social phenomenon, the latter is more easily traceable in the methods of artistic composition. It is a highly self-conscious dissolution of established form for the purpose of creating a subtler, pervasive, and cerebral form. Founded on inevitable frustration, it incorporates in itself techniques of sensory stimulation or irritation that are never fully resolved except through negation. The elaborate and heady manner of decadent art resembles a Beardsley drawing: intricately composed of grotesque figures and artificial designs abstracted from nature, but, when examined carefully, often focusing upon a void of white or black—all of experience reduced to design, but a design that is, in itself, compelling. —*John R. Reed*

Books on My Back

Somerset Maugham was so addicted to the written word that he carried with him, on his incessant travels, a vast laundry bag stuffed with every sort of volume. Out of great literature, he would settle for catalogs and repair manuals. Reading less for pleasure or edification than out of compulsion, Maugham had a horror of running out of his drug, and his book bag caused strong porters to reel.

The backpacker, as his own beast of burden, cannot support such a habit. We became poor porters when we began to walk upright, and civilization has made us dependent on instant bed and board, water and fire, clothing and the utensils to make it all work. We have become so sophisticated, in fact, that to escape with the bare necessities has become our luxury, and our needs have been duly freeze-dried, compressed, goose-downed and aluminumized to reduce the proportions. But even a backpacker does not live by gorp alone, and there seems no reason not to slip a discreet paperback, or two, among the essentials.

Literati on the brink of a walk must consider two criteria: the book as content and as physical object. Seemingly unrelated, these considerations are less so upon examination. Just as food should be drained of bulk and equipment minimalized, so does language travel better if it is compressed, elegant, trimmed of fat, rich but essential. There is no point in warping one's spine under heaped-up adjectives, wrenched metaphors, massed exposition, stale conclusions and rhetorical froth.

I have backpacked with many books and have found, ounce for ounce, that all but the worst have added far more pleasure than burden. I have indulged a weakness for the novels of Conrad and Durrell, the poetry of Wallace Stevens. I have found the comedies of Shakespeare particularly mobile. The difficult poetry one never quite finds time for can give hours of sport in a few pages, and there is a great freedom, a luxury, in being able to exhaust a chosen passage, or a book, without intervention. And after years of experiment I have hit upon the secret: the perfect wilderness reading is a book you have always wanted to go back to. Knowing how the argument comes out, you will not be so engrossed as to miss the trip, and there will be no compulsion to turn the last page for its own sake. You are guaranteed a choice companion, speech that will resonate, the excitement of a reunion in the wilds.

And like creatures of the wild, books can behave unexpectedly. I recently packed *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* on a ten-day hike along the Escalante River, intending to let Annie Dillard's questions about life's extremi-

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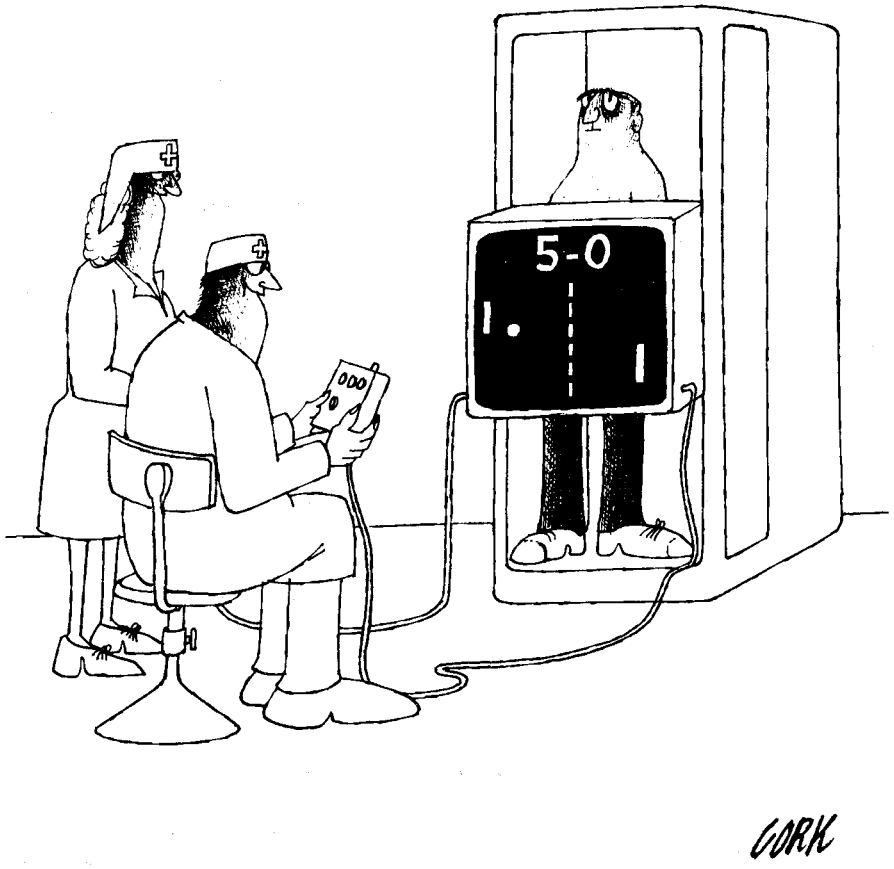
ties hone themselves on the desert—only to find the particulars of the book and the trip running parallel like strands of a double helix. Did Remo mention a close brush with cone-nose bugs? "The cone-nose bug, or kissing bug," reports the book, "bites the lips of sleeping people, sucking blood and injecting an excruciating toxin." Did I remark that the full moon keeps me awake? " 'Some cannot sleep well in a white tent under a full moon,' " Dillard quotes a campcraft authority, adding with amusement, "I like the way that handy woodsy tip threatens us with the thrashings of the spirit." Did Carmen disappear for several hours while we had visions of her being detained by a snake? I picked up the book to distract myself, and read, "I never step foot out of the house, even in winter, without a snakebite kit in my pocket." Were we overwhelmed with ants and bees? Gloria blamed the prevalence of insects on the book's remembered obsessions. One morning I was reading in my sleeping bag, torn between getting up to relieve myself and finishing a chapter. I decided to wrap up the chapter. The next paragraph described the functioning of the kidney. I shot from the bag.

Near the end of the book I was immersed in a scene in which Dillard watches a mosquito sting a copperhead, expressing amazement that insects bite snakes, when Su asked if I would walk with her to the next bend while she tested a newly bandaged toe. On the sandbar at the bend she spotted a small watersnake with a minnow in its mouth. The fish was slightly wider than the snake, and the snake was having a difficult time swallowing. From nowhere a hornet lit on the snake's head and appeared to be biting. The snake drew back as if in pain, heaved and thrashed with the heavy fish, and the hornet flew away. Su, having seen enough, also left. The hornet returned, buzzed the snake's head while the snake shied, then settled near the fish's tail and appeared to feed. I watched as if living the book while hornet and snake dined together, and by the time I left, the snake had swallowed half the minnow in a series of backward heaves. I'm glad I wasn't reading *Deliverance.*



* * *

It has been objected by purists that literature intrudes on the wilderness experience, transports one elsewhere and divides the mind. The primitive virtues are, by definition, pre-Gutenberg, and a friend of mine is so adamant on this point that he compares the packing of print to a craving for junk food. The allegation possesses merit, but betrays the attitude that literature is essentially an escape from reality rather than a penetration. The choice of book, here, is crucial. Anyone brainless enough to pack a guide to self-improvement, or a novel of urban decay, deserves every schizophrenia. I feel more and more, particularly in the wilds, like Annie Dillard, who says, "I shy away . . . from the human emotional stew. I read what the men with the telescopes and microscopes have to say. . . ." One could go so far as to bring a book about the location of one's hike, which might enrich the experience—or might pre-empt original response. Any object packed into the wilderness assumes new importance, and a book which lessens the impact of one's surroundings is indeed an intrusion.

Wilderness is above all an opportunity to heighten one's awareness, to locate the self against the nonself. It is a springboard for introspection. And the greatest words, those which illumine life as it is centrally lived and felt, intensify that process. They provide perspective, a bright mirror that counterpoints and ambushes reality. In isolation one's thoughts can play themselves out without intrusion from the phone, the news media, work, social obligations, conditioned pleasures—or other books. The right writing sharpens, rather than divides, one's perception. Somerset Maugham, the quintessential literary traveler, did not miss much of the passing scene.

Such considerations presume an expedition of time, leisure, the indulgence of whim. Survivalists bent on pushing their frames to the limit are better off packing a few extra energy bars. But those bewitched by the written word need not suffer guilt, or attempt withdrawal, merely because they are headed into the bush. It is in isolation that their habit may break into full flower. It is in the sane outdoors that the distilled thought of one's predecessors or one's contemporaries can become, as it should, a strand of the full life. —*Bruce Berger*

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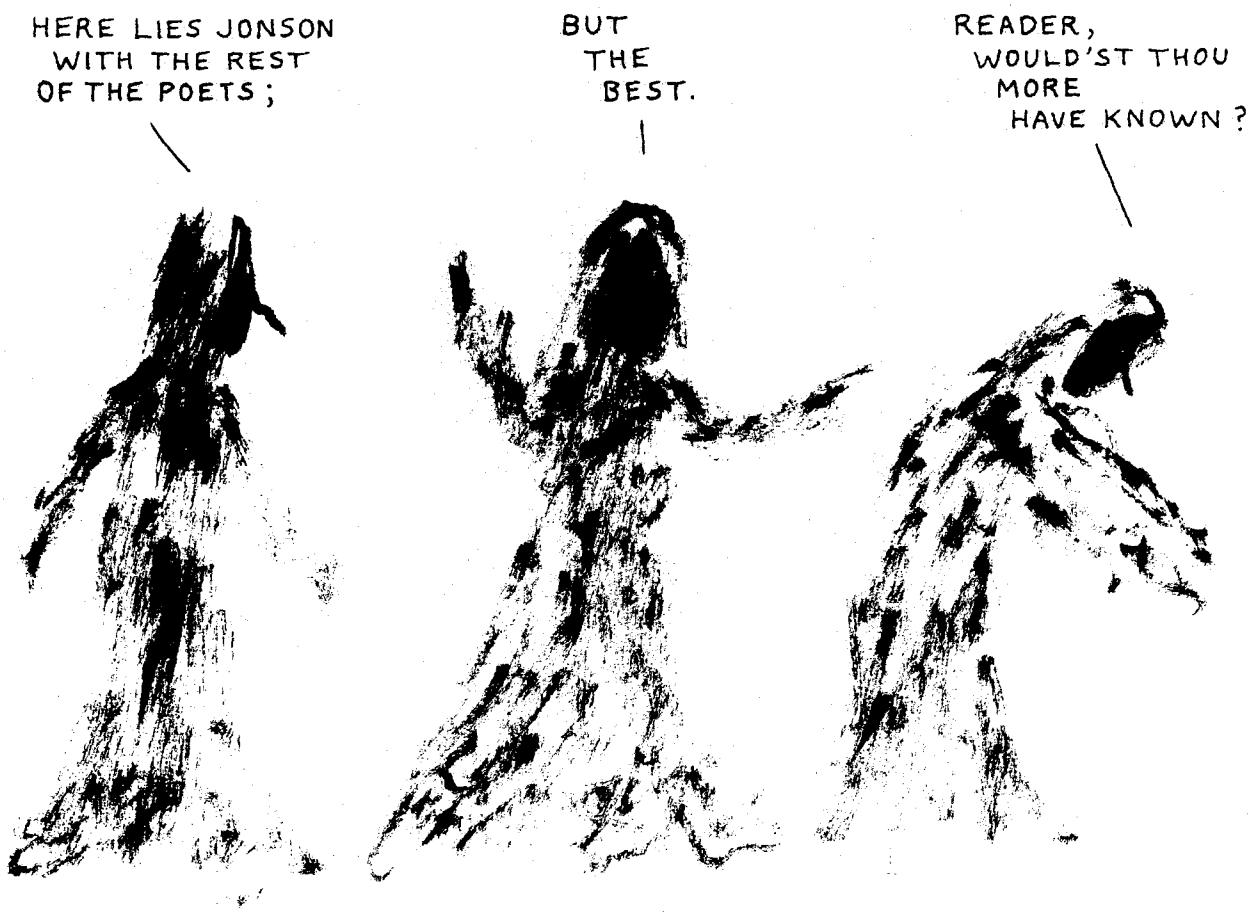
UPON BEN JONSON

BY ROBERT HERRICK


HERE LIES JONSON WITH THE REST OF THE POETS;
BUT THE BEST.
READER, WOULD'ST THOU MORE HAVE KNOWN?
ASK HIS STORY, NOT THIS STONE.
THAT WILL SPEAK WHAT THIS CAN'T TELL OF HIS GLORY.
SO FAREWELL.

END

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Brief Poetry Notices

Swimmer in the Rain, by Robert Wallace. Carnegie-Mellon. $4.50 (paper)

☆☆☆

A calm voice sounding out nature and memory and the fragility of both. Nice, though a long journey with no shouting.

Barn Fever, by Peter Davison. Atheneum. $10; $5.95 (paper)

☆☆☆

A rare—and only once in a while unsettling—joining of the rustic sensibility and the sophisticated voice.

Work, for the Night Is Coming, by Jared Carter. Macmillan. $10.95

☆☆

Hometown pomes, confident and accomplished—but do our poets today fritter themselves away on subjects too commonplace? Winner of the 1980 Walt Whitman Award.

White Monkeys, by Bin Ramke. Georgia. $8.50; $4.50 (paper)

☆☆☆

Ramke may be the New Southern Poetry—or at least one of its notables. This is verdant and nostalgic verse, less draconian than Tate or Ransom, even if infused with their warm-weather irony.

More Trouble with the Obvious, by Michael Van Walleghen. Illinois. $10; $4.95 (paper)

☆

Too aptly titled. Yet chosen for the 1980 Lamont Poetry Prize.

Plums, Stones, Kisses and Hooks, by Ronald Wallace. Missouri. $7.50

☆☆☆

The lives of others and natural objects are woven closely together in these affectionate lyrics, in their best moments recalling Roethke.

The New Physics, by Al Zolynas. Wesleyan. $8; $3.95 (paper)

☆☆

Comme ci, comme ça quotidian slices which imitate so many prevalent voices in current poetry that the effect is pleasant if unmemorable.

Stan Says, by Sharon Olds. Pittsburgh. $10.95; $4.50 (paper)

☆☆☆

An earnest and courageous first book. This is poetry corresponding to the New Feminism: "women's poetry" for Everybody.

The 1981 National Poetry Series:

1. *In Winter,* by Michael Ryan. Holt Rinehart Winston. $5.95 (paper)

☆

What can one say of a fussiness that requires an asterisk to signal a stanza breaking at the bottom of the page? Perhaps that it echoes this precious and pretentious verse.

---

2. *Leaving Taos,* by Robert Peterson. Harper & Row. $5.95 (paper)

☆

Prose tricked out as poetry—and spotty prose at that. Somehow self-indulgence here is being mistaken for art, as one mistakes derelicts for philosophers.

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3. *The Dollmaker's Ghost,* by Larry Levis. Dutton. $6.15 (paper)

☆☆

These academic poems are absolutely under control, absolutely right. One comes to the end of most of them admiring their correctness, but wondering what was the point.

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4. *So This Is the Map,* by Reg Saner. Random House. $5.95 (paper)

☆☆☆

Geographies that encompass tourist meccas, cities, universes, all rich with a language that rarely lets itself get simple. A good read, but one longs for spaces to rest, to think.

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5. *Gumbo,* by George Barlow. Doubleday. $6.95 (paper)

☆☆☆☆

A book part white English, part Black English, all interest and poetry. One and a half out of five ain't so bad.

The Boy Under the Bed, by Philip Dacey. Johns Hopkins. $10.95; $5.95 (paper).

☆☆☆☆

These are body and metabody poems assuming the mystic presence of spirit in all things visible and invisible. Dacey, as priest or magician, is maker of the word-in-flesh.

When They Have Senses, by Rosemary Waldrop. Burning Deck. $12.50; $3.50 (paper).

☆

Billed as women's glimpses of the relations between men and women and between sex and money, Waldrop's splintered verse leaves everything to the imagination—except the language.

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The Iowa Writers' Workshop, by Stephen Wilbers. Iowa

Record of a Good Name:

Unfortunate Hiroshima is boilerplate for the Media. What happened there might happen again. Not Carthage. *Carthagio delenda est.* What happened there will not happen again. Simone Weil tells how the Carthaginians begged the conquerors to kill them but spare their city. The Romans, to be Romans, ignored the pleas and did what they had come to do. They trashed the city and I reckon they brought in galley loads of poets to sing the victory. Perhaps that is the real meaning of "sowing with salt." Perhaps the Romans developed a National Endowment for poets. To rub salt in the salt, so to speak. Wise Romans. SPQR.

No second Carthage. No second Troy. But real estate was cheaper then, and Iowa City has been kept visibly intact. The uninterrupted history of its Writers' Workshop begins, as Mr. Wilbers notes, with the prairie Regionalists. In his faithful little book he keeps the antediluvian relics as in a hushed museum. The bones stand there in their monumental whiteness, the name tags are correctly lettered, from Josiah Royce to Norman Foerster to Paul Engle (my own "notorious" name somewhere among them in an appropriate footnote). The museum guards are studying their fingernails as the schoolteachers herd their children past. This is Natural History. It can do no harm.

Nor can I, by any qualifications or addenda I might at this time offer. That I have survived at all thus far (and far from home) has got to mean there are a number of things I am too smart to say in the wrong place and in a time still wrong. So I will certainly say nothing that can be taken as defense or apologia for "Regionalism." It is a word successfully booby-trapped by the conquerors and quislings who took over the art apparatuses of the U of Iowa and integrated them with the requirements of the national Academic-Media Complex, a signal for the Masters of the Laugh Machine to push the button.

The harm that was done was to make the harm unimaginable, at any rate inarticulable. (Only, the last sleepwalking child in the file passing the bones may hear what he mistakes for a whisper: "Remember that Extinct *is* Forever." And this rumor of silence may make him hurry to catch up with the others and get out in the blessed sunlight of Iowa City where the poets are singing as if there were no tomorrow.)

But since it can do no harm nor set any record straight in the curved space between City Park and the Power Plant, I may indicate that Regionalism appeared to me as a configuration of reality and the imagination, an ineluctable intersection of concretenesses, no more destructible than an axiom in geometry. For my turn at the dice I'll give the story of an untold story. Both the told and the untold have the merit of being true, for whatever that is worth in the axiomatic Iowa which lies just to the west of the boneyard where Bergman's Guardians polish their nails on their uniform lapels.

* * *

One morning in August of (I think) 1963 a young man sitting in a bar on Clinton Street was shot by another. The wounded man staggered toward the sun in the doorway, collapsed and died on the already scorching sidewalk. The shooting was duly reported by the *Daily Iowan,* the *Press Citizen,* and—for all I can remember—by the Des Moines *Register* itself. I knew only one of the three young fellows involved in the shooting. All I saw of the crucial event was the dried pattern of blood on the sidewalk, outlined by the yellow chalk mark the police had made to register where the body had fallen. The only truly remarkable thing about the spill of blood was how long it lasted. I walked past to note its strange persistence on three, four, five days of majestic August heat. I suppose I asked some friends, "Why don't they wash it away?" No one gave an answer to this, though I suppose we all knew the answer.

The odor of rotting blood was no major impediment to pedestrian traffic on Clinton St. But in the August weather it was detectable. I remember its smell because all blood smells alike when it rots. The black archipelago of stains within the yellow border printed on my retina like something I had seen elsewhere, and I had rather desperate feelings—unseemly for a member of the English Department at Iowa—that I must take a bucket of water up to Clinton Street some night and wash away the blood. Let them keep the yellow chalk mark if that was what they needed for police purposes.

Like everyone else smart enough to write a book in that town, I knew why they had not washed the blood away. With the same impulse of panic that made me want to wash it away myself, I wanted to tell the whole story of the shooting which destroyed the lives of two young fellows and perhaps a third (he died of cancer a few years later), and of why no one in Iowa City could spell out the answers everyone knew. Goodness, I said, it's like a story we have heard from the old times. (Cat got your tongue? said the cat.) Goodness, we could call it *Dark In August,* couldn't we, bringing the Mediterranean and American myths of a blighting curse right home to Clinton Street?

With that false naiveté which many have resented in me, I got on the phone to New York to check out the market for this Corn State melodrama. I remember that a friendly editor at *Look* magazine was "keenly" interested until I betrayed his trust by telling him the racial mix of the three young men whose blood rotted in the sun on Clinton Street for five August days. Telling him was a calculated perversity on my part. After all, I had spent eight years in New York and had been a reader of the national press since student days. I certainly knew the "needs" of the guardians of the free press. "George," I said, "could you use the story if I switched the races of the killer and the man shot and their mutual friend? Could you use it then?" My editorial friend thought I was insulting his journalistic integrity. Which, of course, I was.

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Everyone in Iowa City smart enough to write it knew why the true story could not be used in *Look* magazine in any form that substantially qualified what had been correctly reported by the local newspapers. None that I knew was more tempted than I to "fictionalize" it in the sense of making it a conformable lie. The expedient choice was to let it alone, as the blood had been left, mostly unremarked, on the sidewalk through those sizzling days. (I am sorry I don't actually know what happened to that blood. In some of my dreams the rain came in its mercy to do what someone should have done. Sometimes when I open a book by some Workshop writer of those times, I see it on the page, now as odorless as Emily's rose.)

The parable may have a point only for me. It seemed to me then as it seems to me now that the opportunity and inexorable obligation of Regionalism would be to stand within that yellow circle in Iowa City and tell the story of the killing to the best of our abilities. That the story might or might not have been printable was an obstacle to be overcome when and as we might. Why the story was not printable becomes part of the story as the layers multiply. Belling the cat that got our tongue was part of the duty of the writer.

* * *

The duty of the writer. . . . That the writers of my generation who foregathered at the Workshop in irregular sequences had a *duty* designated by tradition and the historical circumstances of our times is what I am labeling (however obscurely or fancifully) the Carthaginian principle which seems to me the irreducible justification for the whole endeavor. It was the legacy available from those who gave the Workshop its initial impetus, the option we would take up fumbling as best we could according to our gifts, our endurance, our necessarily unsettled perception of where the duty would lead. We had something on our hands to save or desperately lose, something too large to be named by slogan or formula, palpable nevertheless.

We had come out of the War, with its pride and guilt and dreadful forebodings of things still to come. No generation of writers ever had a more potent phalanx of immediate ancestors whose gains were ready for consolidation—Hemingway, Faulkner, Dreiser, Fitzgerald, Lewis, Dos Passos—the roster is familiar as the lines of continuity in national conscience or consciousness are blurred, by our good work and our falling short. I suppose a host of us are "better writers" than some of the aforementioned ancestors, but what may be extinct is the core of conviction that what we are doing is or might be necessary testament of things shared and known by our countrymen of these decades.

I am far from supposing that this sense of obligation is more or less extinct now at the Workshop in Iowa City than anywhere else. What I am saying is that it was there like an imminence in the great times and that, in my own fashion, I watched it struggle along under constant threat and that this endless tussle is the epic to which all other accounts are subsidiary.

* * *

Steve Wilbers' is the best book that is going to be written about that mighty sum of things that was the Workshop in Iowa City. One would be a damn fool not to admire it for that reason alone. Holding it in my hands I enjoy a certain hard-earned amusement in remembering how, in my last correspondence with the author, I urged him to withhold it from publication. The reason behind the advice was on the order of: "Iowa City is, per design, the place you can't say what everyone knows." In putting such advice on paper I was no more naive (nor sincere, either) than when I called the *Look* editor about the killing on Clinton St. (Hi Steve! Here's the occasion to say I'm glad you knew what I really meant and got your book out where fit readers will have the chance to decode it. The cities fall and are built again and those who build them again under the noses of the guardians have to be subtle as serpents.)

Just as Paul Engle used to say, with that poetic bluntness which offended so many of his time-serving colleagues, it is the story of Madame Bovary in its fundamental design. "Look at the druggist Homais prosper while the Baffled Lady thrashes toward his poison," was, I believe, more or less the way Paul phrased it.

But an American tragedy withal. The great American business saga of those who built something good and those who took it over when it became profitable for them to do so. That story is more familiar to us from reading of industry raids and coups than in the tale of the arts simply because as things stand the American writing about business is more honest and intelligible than what we are given by the *Kunstwaffe* of art and education.

On only one point do I feel qualified to offer a correction of the author's text or compositional tactics. On page 116 he notes that both Engle and I describe Eugene Garber as a " 'man of perfect integrity.' " (I am happy to add my observation that Garber has become one of the very best of our living short story writers.) Then Garber is quoted immediately after this as saying, "the big blow-ups were more personality than ideology, I think." The effect is to make it seem I endorse this statement as part and parcel of the integrity noted, and I do not.

The statement is totally wrong, except in the misleading and irrelevant sense that if there were no "personalities" to articulate them, ideologies would neither exist nor come into conflict. If there were partisans in the obligatory scenes of 1964 who simply acted out their personalities, compulsions, idiosyncrasies and practical interests, it is up to them to say so. Not me. I made a choice based on the ideologies and forces as I saw them. In fact my choice to force the matter to a head was the best chance I could see to bring the ideological issues into the open.

Fat chance. Merely the best chance I had available to show and say the irrepressible conflict was between those who meant to tell the story and those who meant to use the Workshop to relay the Party Line into the colonies. Between the Star System and the Jeffersonian republic. Between the Masters of the Word (an epithet dear to the media princes, who should know what it means if anyone does) and the Servants of the Word. Anyone who bothered then or thereafter to read *anything* I have written, listened to *anything* I have said, knows I chose to be with the servants.

Or, if the choice was not really an open choice for me by that time, it was because it had been closed by words I had heard at the University of Iowa which, when I heard them, I supposed I had no choice but to serve. Like poor Matthew, seated at custom, I had to follow where I was told to follow. Somehow Norman Foerster had got me to read Matthew

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Arnold who, in his turn at playing the role, had said quaintly that a great university might be a "Queen of Romance," surely not to be treated *en putain* by those with a career to grease along.

John Crowe Ransom came by one time and happened to say, "We remember literature by its noblest moments." That struck me as the voice of authority, and as something I would never have known if I hadn't learned it at the Workshop.

At one of his moments which I took to be noble, confronting John Gerber, Paul Engle said, "I've led my people into the desert." Whadda y'know, folks? I hadn't gone to that meeting intending to cause any trouble. My personality is I can be a liked guy when I choose, but just right then and there when I heard those words I began uttering a puny ultimatum—one which Mr. Gerber was later to describe as a "pistol at his head."

Some pistol! Some head!

But that's another story not to be told, though I think there are fragments of it in Mr. Wilbers' archives.

I am only trying to say that as far as I can discern there *was* an ideological conflict involved, and my choice was to go with a cause I knew to be lost rather than trifle with the Star System abuilding by the other crew.

* * *

The specters which will haunt us all down to our graves are of the things we knew and could not say, whether from ineptitude and doubt or from the practical prohibitions—call them tact, censorship, or the mad caprices of the publishing situation in our time. This is a great people and the things we have seen or endured are worthy of our sojourning. It never occurred to me to imagine that the writing which came out of the Workshop matched the magnitude of either the obligation or opportunity it rashly took on. What was always in my mind is that it might have been the breakthrough point from which a large and fit literary consciousness expanded some local gains. Or it might have endured as a redoubt where the noble design of its founders persisted without the national visibility that would attract predators. There is something to be said for ignored asylums in the Kingdom of Blab and Slam.

Might have . . . if what? I never imagined the answer to that. If there was ever a Golden Age for the University or the Workshop, I saw no ocular proof of it in the years I hung around. As far as I could make out there was always going on more undermining than mining of the lode around us. It is my belief we lived there in vacillations between the sins of despair and vanity or greed. Knifing and four-flushing were part of the trade we learned and taught. Particularly in the early 'sixties the signs abounded that the Big Knife was about to descend. I can't remember that on any given day I really believed it might be forestalled. Yet through my sins of despair I had an unshakeable conviction it ought not go where it was visibly tending.

It was one of those queer places and times on the earth where the sleepers dream they are about to waken and know it is heavily forbidden to lapse back from that anguish. Where the potency of the great legend seems like a remembered reality though the tangible evidence is contradictory. The Workshop had a good name—and by *name* I mean something different from reputation, which is a commodity. (Once I heard a rare young woman say the Libbers had "given women a bad name." What? I said. In spite of all the positive propaganda? Her gaze didn't flinch. She had said what she meant. She had red, mournful lips. I believed her.)

The Workshop had a good name and deserves to keep it. Whatever was written, published, sold from there, or whatever languishes in manuscript, or has been forgotten or destroyed, or was never got on paper, somehow I think we kept the stories, kept book. This summer I've been in touch with two old-timers, and we fell, as if naturally, into mention of Wilbers' sturdy work and then into discussion of who should or would tell the "real story." It satisfies me that both said, "Mary."

Mary Engle, who had her share and more of the gift, the gaiety, the fun and the dismembering experience which others with larger reputations shared. Mary, we said. Let Mary tell it and it will begin to come out right. It seemed not to enter our minds that Mary is dead and therefore unlikely to spill the miraculous and magical beans of truth and reality. Since that is how things had to be, that, no doubt, is how things should be. *–R.V. Cassill*

Carnal Innocence, Sinful Indulgence

The White Hotel, by D. M. Thomas. Viking. $12.95

The world of *The White Hotel* is the world of Hieronymus Bosch. If you set before your mind's eye the most familiar of Bosch's works, the Garden of Earthly Delights panel of the famous triptych, you will sense what I mean. So much is going on in the Garden of Earthly Delights that it is difficult or impossible—for the modern eye, at least—to sort out what is happening. While the picture is part of a visual morality play centered on the temptations offered by the devil to the unwary lustful, it is not so certain that Bosch was straightforward in his condemnation of those earthly pleasures. The naked ladies are quite attractive. They and their friends are taking their pleasure in ways that are simultaneously prurient and repulsive. Coupled with the other two panels of which this is the center, we see evil coming into the world in the midst of innocence, while the right hand panel shows us the torments of the lustful in hell. The setting—sky, terrain, flora and fauna—share in this ambivalence. Some of the animals have been shaped into tortured, horrible forms never spawned by nature. Vegetative shapes echo this irrealism, or surrealism, anachronistically suggesting a garden plot stung by laser beams that have debauched their DNA. All these features are combined by Bosch to represent the two-sided character of erotic play. In the very midst of dalliance, death and destruction are already present. But if Bosch is conventionally condemnatory, he is also celebrative of the pleasures of the body and its bittersweet indulgence in forbidden fruit. More generally, Bosch seems to have recognized, if only unconsciously, that condemnation shades insensibly into affirmation. After all the attempts at symbolic interpretation and citing of modern parallels, the work of Bosch maintains its mystery. Was he a closet Adamite, a member of the

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late medieval sect that sought to return to the innocence of Eden by taking off their clothes and celebrating the purity of nudity? Or is the Garden of Earthly Delights simply a vision of the terrifying duplicity of the devil as he uses the beauty of flesh to tempt the sinner into the depths of Hell?

The ambiguities of a work of art are essential to the mystery of the aesthetic effect. That effect seems never to yield completely to the critic's urge to recover it in a form of words that courts discursive clarity.

The White Hotel never directly invokes the work of Bosch. Here its allusiveness is only in the mind's eye of this reader. But the central allusion, to the work of Freud, is direct and even explained in a short preface. Its Freudianism is unlike any other Freudian novel that I can recall. The first few pages hardly prepare the reader for what is to come. We read an exchange of letters between Freud and Ferenczi, fictional, but so steeped in the Freudian idiom that the more the reader is familiar with the real thing the more likely he is to suspend disbelief when he reads these.

* * *

The bare story of *The White Hotel* is quite ordinary. Everything depends on the author's decision to risk a literary method that combines poetic, psychoanalytic, and prophetic modes of narration in a novel of palimpsest. Without the strangeness of the telling, without the mysteries that remain after "explanation" of the allusions, this would not be the exceptional work of art it is.

The heroine of the story is an opera singer somewhat short of first-class stature, Lisa Erdman. Lisa, who is half-Jewish, comes to Eastern Europe from Russia as a consequence of the suspicious deaths of her mother and uncle. She lives with a dancemistress, embarks on an unsuccessful marriage, and in the process becomes a hysteric. She suffers from shortness of breath (like the Dora of Freud's genuine case history) and from a gnawing pain in her left breast and left ovary that will not yield to conventional treatment. As "Anna G.," she becomes a patient of Freud and the book contains a simulated case-history that is simply uncanny in its fidelity to the Freudian idiom.

Following the Freud-Ferenczi prologue, the story proper opens with a short narrative poem that recounts Lisa's seduction during a train journey and culminates in a tryst in the "white hotel." Though we learn later that the poem is the compulsive outpouring of a hysteric's fantasy, the reader already senses pathology. This is a fantasy that, like Bosch's, projects the inner life of a disturbed personality upon the "real" world. Yet part of the "reality" of those events is the experience of their recorder. It would be ridiculous to require that these inner realities match up with the reality-orientation assumed in a medical case-history. After all, the poetry is a symptom. The second section of the book recounts some of the same events. This time the teller is not identified, but it clearly is a narrator with an intention to illuminate the events of the poetic fantasy while, in a sense, adding to rather than subtracting from their mysteriousness. We do learn more—for example, we see that the anonymous seducer of the poem is Freud's son. But whether he "really" is or whether this is a psychological identification resulting from the transference is unclear. And we learn more in detail of the strange, strange character of the white hotel where seduction yields to session after session of imaginative love-making.

It is important to underline what I just touched on above. The retellings of the story both add understanding of what is going on with Lisa Erdman and her life while deepening the sense of its mystery and confusedness. For example, in the Gastein Journal section, we find reproduced a series of postcards that purport to be written to folks back home by various hotel guests. They are like no vacation postcards that were ever written. Yet, given that suspension of disbelief earlier remarked, they seem half-convincing. For the white hotel is a place touched by wizardry and odd miracle. Schools of whales are sighted that may or may not be there, the elm leaves are seen to be red—or are they?, stars fall in profusion, an orange grove and roses drift into the lake. Finally, the hotel burns to the ground and many of the guests are killed or injured. Oddly, all that lovemaking, the holiday sidetrips and the mountain-climbing excursions go right on in the midst of the carnage. The matter of fact narration of these weird goings-on contrasts madly with the gothic horror of the events. Reality is unreal. Yet the effect remains one of a half-convincing illusion. An illusion that might belong to reality. Most of us have a willingness to believe, or half-believe, in the Boschian world of strange shapes and frantic desires because most of us are at least vaguely aware of what Freud called the Id, the unconscious home of unprocessed desire and uncivilized fantasies of instinctual satisfaction. In the white hotel it is as if this repressed world had been let loose in the world of phenomenal reality. And for all its strangeness, we are half-able to suspend disbelief because we recognize something normally unacceptable in consciousness, namely our untrammeled basic personal identities. In our most conventional moments, all of us know that those conventional appearances mask repressed and forbidden other selves, other scenes, other possibilities.

One of the major themes in this rich montage of fantasy is the theme of frantic and compulsive sexual coupling. Lisa and her lover mount the steps to their room as the sexual arousal begun earlier literally bursts out in intercourse. In what seems almost like a genuinely Boschian allusion, a plump peach that Lisa is devouring bursts, its juices dripping across the carpet as the two lovers lock in coital embrace. This incessant sexual activity brings in Lisa's milk and, after supplying her lover's demands, Lisa has plenty left over to service everyone in the dining room. She begins with an old priest (later identified as Freud himself) and works up to the chef. Such is the charmed ambience of the white hotel that the guests, staid middle class and professional types, are hardly surprised and certainly not disapproving of Lisa's bosomy generosity. This generosity does not end with slaking the thirst of all those who want a taste of human milk but is extended to the gratification of the sexual appetites of voyeurs and casual acquaintances. Lisa, who herself admits that she is "easily aroused," is entered by the self-same chef who surprises the two lovers *in flagrante delicto* while doing some painting outside their window. He joins the two in an unselfish *ménage à trois*. Later, a guest at the hotel, Madame Cottin, a widowed corsetiere and a bit past her matronly prime, is brought into another threesome to the general satisfaction of all concerned.

* * *

As this book is read for the first time, it must strike one as an odd mixture of pruriently interesting sexual capers,

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an account of the return of the repressed under the influence of neurotic catharsis. Lisa's poem sets the theme that is varied in the later retellings. But the meaning is elusive. Only when armed with the ending can the reader hope to satisfy himself about the genuine subjects of this novel. All initial appearances to the contrary, it is not a pruriently engaging book. The primary point of the white hotel's strange orgies is made explicit in the last few lines of Lisa's poem:

> I didn't mind which of them was in, . . . it was good to feel a part of me was someone else, *no one was selfish in the white hotel.* (italics mine)

Like the Bosch panels, *The White Hotel* is a morality play. Like the Garden of Earthly Delights, the moral emerges from a foreground of avid physical indulgence but the point is not the indulgence. The point is what the freed desire signifies. The white hotel is a dreamed-of place where the exclusiveness of modern sexual politics, the jealous possession of the beloved by the lover, is abrogated. The milk so willingly shared is human milk. It is also symbolic milk, the "milk of human kindness," or the milk of the "milk and honey" promised in the Land of Canaan to the parched Israelites. Lisa is not just "Lisa," as it turns out later, but also the Rose of Sharon. She is an Earth-Mother whose sexual arousal encompasses not merely a single needy person but whose Eros expands to nourish all those in need. In this fantasy, human need easily pierces the repressive barriers that separate one person from another and stop up mutual compassion. Plain, ordinary conventional people—touched by the magic of the white hotel—shed their repressions and are erotically transformed. Is this more than moralistic fantasy? Is it more than a Freudian tour-de-force? What is the white hotel, finally?

I understand the white hotel as I understand Voltaire's Eldorado. Eldorado is a place where reason prevails as contrasted to the corruption and irrationality of Europe. Similarly, the white hotel is a utopia where social repression is bracketed and suspended in order that we can see the vision of an eroticized society. While Voltaire's version of reason derives from Newtonian science, it appears that D. M. Thomas's rational utopia is celebrating the "rationality" of Herbert Marcuse, the radical Freudian social theorist. Briefly, Marcuse holds that the repression of the Id that is imposed by current society is, in fact, overrepression. Could we rid ourselves of the surplus of repression, we would find possible a rational society that permits a much freer expression of instinctual desires. For example, sexuality would be freed from its repressive focus upon genital pleasure and expand to include a fully-eroticized body. Thus Lisa, as Earth-Mother, is willing to copulate with all who have desire and to nourish all those who thirst for her sustenance. And as the needy are fulfilled, so is Lisa. However, the white hotel is not a pure Marcusean fantasy. The Freudian death-instinct is present in the destructive chaos that accompanies the mutuality of unselfish erotic expression.

The white hotel, though it drops clues here and there, for the most part simply displays the fully-eroticized body in action. Full eroticism calls into play all the body orifices. It wipes out possessiveness. Hence the voyeurism of the chef at the window is transformed into a model of shared pleasure. Madame Cottin breaks the exclusivity of heterosexual focus by adding a lesbian flavor. The fancied physiological connection between genital arousal and the flow of copious supplies of breast milk marks the enlarging of Eros from paired sex toward the nourishing of the whole community. The white hotel is a utopian carnival that celebrates the possibilities of human wholeness seen in a polymorphous-perverse world. Sigmund Freud himself had been a cautious critic of an overrepressive society. *The White Hotel* goes beyond Freud, using Freud against Freud to visualize what Freud might have foreseen had he lived in today's world.

* * *

The Freudian case history simulation of the "Anna G." version of the events of the seduction and its aftermath in the white hotel brings the reader out of the polymorphous-perverse world of a Marcusean utopia into the personality of Lisa. We learn, or it is purported that we learn, from a

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Freudian point of view, how Lisa got to be the way she is. We plumb the neurotic source of the fantasies. But, and this is quite important, the Freudian analysis turns out to be—not so much mistaken—as only partially explanatory and finally inadequate in its reconstruction of the etiology of Lisa's hysterical afflictions. Briefly, the case history traces "Anna's" breathlessness and her aching left breast and ovary to repressed lesbianism. The traumatic event of childhood that was repressed in memory and that created the symptoms in its stead was discovered to be Lisa's having witnessed her aunt, mother, and uncle in the act of consummating an illicit summer romance. Later, when the case history is sent to Lisa, in order to get her consent to its publication, Lisa writes to Freud confessing that the analysis was even more incomplete than Freud had imagined. The adulterous event in the summer house was merely a screen protecting the recollection of a still more traumatic *ménage à trois* on her father's yacht. And it now seems that the pains Lisa suffers are something peculiarly organic, not merely the classic conversion symptoms of the hysteric.

As a matter of fact, as it turns out (and this is not fully clear until the end), the pains are part of the clairvoyant wisdom of Lisa's body. For, as Freud is made to concede, Lisa has telepathic gifts. Not only does she see visions of the future, but her body bears the proleptic marks of events that will happen but which have not happened yet. Here is suggested the interdependence, perhaps the identity, of body and mind. In some strange way, Lisa's fate is marked out physically and corresponds to, or is a part of, her having seen bits and pieces of the future that awaits her.

What does all this portend about the Freudian interpretation of the basis of hysteria? In Lisa's case, at least, it says that Freudian reductionism just misses the point. Freud wanted to focus his therapy upon the symptom, find the cause in the past, have the patient reveal to himself what he had forgotten through repression, and then return the patient to his "normal unhappiness." When what has been repressed becomes consciously known, the cure should emerge automatically. That the symptom might have a serious content hardly occurred to Freud; that would have threatened his conviction that psychoanalysis was science, a possibility that he could not allow himself to entertain. To put the threat in its strongest form, it would imply that, perhaps, the society ought to be adjusted to fit the needs of "sick" people rather than the "sick" person adjusted to the requirements of conventional society. It is just this possibility that *The White Hotel* is all about.

While Freud the clinical psychologist and therapist is shown to be a halting and inaccurate guide to the depths of psychological reality, the Freud of the later, speculative works also comes into prominence in *The White Hotel*. It is a very different Freud. The key to the human condition is seen as the contest between two gigantic opposed forces, Life and Death, Eros and Thanatos. Eros expresses itself at first in the urge for singular pleasure. Then it expands beyond the merger of two and spreads out to embrace larger and larger unities. Thanatos is the dark companion of Eros, threatening to destroy or disintegrate all that Eros wants to unite. Though one or the other may dominate, Life is never celebrated without the (hidden) presence of its Negation. Eros stands for the vitality and freedom of the body. Thanatos stands for the utter quiet and lifelessness of the world from which biological organisms emerged eons ago. In conventional society, Death makes itself known in history by the presence of hostile and aggressive destructiveness. For unless Death is accepted consciously, it gets projected outwards—against all the others—as the condition of its denial for oneself.

The late Freudian dualism of the instincts is an underlying theme and organizing principle of the white hotel sequences. Lisa is the embodiment of free Eros. Her athletic Earth-Motherism is unmistakable. When the chef fills his champagne glass with human milk, we should understand that a needy world is being nourished by unselfish love of the Mother. We also see the Death instinct in the midst of this joyous eroticism. A ski lift breaks apart carrying many of the guests to their deaths below, including Madame Cottin—who just the evening before was part of a joyful erotic romp with Lisa and her young man. The guests fall in slow motion. Some are impaled on trees, some are drowned in the lake below—but, even as death claims their companions, Lisa and her paramour continue their erotic games. The hotel that burned, killing many of the guests, is quickly rebuilt and the new guests take the place of the old even while funeral services are being held for the victims.

* * *

All this is highly-charged symbolism. In one sense, as we saw, it is but the ravings of an hysterical imagination. But it is more. Lisa, hardly known to herself, is a seer and prophetess. In the various layers of telling and retelling of the white hotel story—as poem, as narrative, as case-history—we acquire multiple perspectives on the same events. We sometimes see those events as mere grist for the psychoanalytic mill. But, since there are two Freuds at work here, we also see those same confused events as hostages for the whole of suffering humanity. For the white hotel is, as it were, an interim utopia, a foreshadowing of the section that is titled The Camp.

This last section, only seventeen pages long, transforms and then informs the reader's grasp of what has been happening in the earlier portions of this novel. For I admit to being both puzzled about and admiring of the approach of the author before encountering The Camp. The Freudian commentary, masterfully unspoken, but plainly enough intended was there—but to what purpose? What was he really up to? If this really is a morality play, I wondered, what was the moral?

By now, Lisa's life, guided by the fateful twinges of pain, has moved through a second marriage to the husband of an opera-singer friend, and Lisa's journey back to Russia to live with her new husband. But Victor dies and Lisa and her foster-son are swept up in the madness of the Holocaust. In Russia, this meant that Lisa and her son move into the maelstrom of Babi Yar. It is not the task of a reviewer to reproduce the effect aimed at by the author. The utter, unbelievable cruelty and inhumanity of the slaughter is magnificently captured. One almost physically feels the fear and terror of the victims and the brutal dehumanization of the executioners. When the murders are over, the horror does not end. The deaths of a quarter of a million Jews, Ukrainians, gypsies, and Russians created a putrid lake in what was once a ravine. The dam that held in the

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lake burst and part of Kiev was covered with the stinking mud in which corpses frozen in their last agonies had to be laboriously dug out. This section, which frequently tests the reader's ability to read on, ends with this sentence: "But all this had nothing to do with the guest, the soul, the lovesick bride, the daughter of Jerusalem."

In that final sentence the conclusion is seeded, the moral of the morality play. That moral is expanded and explained—insofar as an apocalypse can be "explained"—in The Camp. The Camp is the obverse, the complementary opposite, of an actual, historical death camp like Bergen-Belsen. It is, so to speak, a "life" camp. To it, the bedraggled dead of Babi Yar and all the others stream across a small bridge to the "middle of nowhere." There they are met, placed on numbered rolls, and bused to an oasis. In Lisa's and her son's cases, they are billeted in a building that "looked like a hotel." In this camp, the dead—or most of them—have returned to life. They have been resurrected in the flesh, not just in spirit. For example, Lisa's breast and pelvis still retain their painful tenderness. There she eventually meets and talks with her mother, with her father by phone, and, in general, renews her acquaintance with the fleshed ghosts of her past. Most important is her meeting and talk with her mother. In this encounter beyond the grave, the flawed family romance is finally laid bare, the truth is shared between mother and daughter, and there is reconciliation and peace. The theme of nutrition, important in the white hotel of the poem and its narrative retellings, is reinforced in this meeting. The two embrace and each is fed from the breast of the other. This is milk that not merely refreshes (it is a hot desert day) but also solemnizes the renewal of mutual affection and understanding. The misunderstanding that separated them is overcome in unity and love, love both physical and spiritual. Lisa's father, somehow not yet quite restored to full humanity, is only reachable by phone. But they talk together and it is apparent that, in time, all those separated by misunderstanding in their previous lives will eventually be reconciled.

Even the old Freud is seen by Lisa in this Camp. He too, in spite of his convictions about the illusory, wish-fulfilling character of all dreams of future reconciliation, has emigrated. He is an isolated, grumpy figure with a puckered, apparently still cancerous mouth and jaw. He grimly puffs on his ever-present cigar.

At the end of this short concluding section, a new wave of emigrants is streaming into the camp. The young lieutenant, whom we are not surprised to see has become Lisa's intimate friend, is organizing the settlement of the new inhabitants just as Lisa returns from the final sorting out of her previous life. He greets her as the "Rose of Sharon," and Lisa characteristically moves into her philosophical frame of mind. Candide-like, she asks why there is evil in a world that holds so many potentialities for happiness. The lieutenant, instead of taking up the cue for a conversation about why this is not the best of all possible worlds, directs her attention to the emigrants who are being moved to the casualty units. "Can you help?" he asks. Lisa can. She runs toward the wounded, ". . . and only then did she realize that all day her pelvis had not hurt, nor her breast."

* * *

While the world of *The White Hotel* is the world of Bosch, it does not share in all the Boschian conventions. The triptych shows flawed innocence, followed by sinful indulgence, capped by hellish punishment for the impenitent. The white hotel of this novel's beginning is likewise a symbol of flawed innocence. This is because the white hotel is a womb, in classic Freudian symbolism (a symbolism anticipated, incidentally, in Bosch's repetitive plexiglass "eggs" that enclose and protect). In the womb, we were innocent. There also we bear the stain of original sin, or, as Freud would have it, the Lamarckian inheritance of the death instinct. It is high irony that the very inheritance that could nurture us in unity at the same time forces us apart in hostile aggression. Thus the white hotel is a complex symbol—even a contradictory one. It stands for innocence. It simultaneously stands for its opposite, ambivalently co-present Death. It is this ambivalence that Lisa is constantly, partly unconsciously, aware of, as she thinks about sex and at the same time thinks about death. She "sees" the future deaths of herself and her friends. She "sees" her lover's body frozen in his coffin (on the Russian front?).

In the white hotel innocence goes along with love, carnally expressed, and its accompaniment, love (or *agapè*), nutritionally expressed. The emphasis on genital release and the compulsive passion of grasping the "forbidden fruit" of illicit sexual congress is not the focus, in spite of first impressions. The ultimate focus is upon the nutritive aspect of Eros, upon the mother and her relation to the offspring she suckles. In the white hotel, that mother-babe relation is easily expanded to embrace strangers in need. And the same unselfish Mother-Eros widens to envelop all humanity in its net of fellow-feeling. Giving is physical and spiritual release for those who give, while at the same time it nourishes and draws into the circle of love those who would otherwise be outsiders and enemies. But even in the charmed circle of the white hotel, death is all around and about. The white hotel is nothing more and nothing less than the literary representation of the Freudian life-death dualism of the instincts being lived out in hysterical fantasy. Love is never pure. Always there is the undertow of death in the midst of ecstatic loss of self.

When the narrative of Lisa Erdman leaves the realm of the white hotel fantasy and moves into the historical arena, the book takes on added depth. While the beginning speaks to the complexity of Lisa's inner self, the Lisa of actual history is hardly recognizable as the person revealed by therapy. In Freudian terms, the contrast comes between the pathological symptoms of an hysteric as weighed against the "real life" of that "same" person caught in the net of reality. It is the contrast of the pleasure principle versus the reality principle. Yet the contrast fails. The reality of history is constituted by the inner, projected "realities" of all those, more or less pathological themselves, who create history by their mass action. Thus reality is itself infected by hysteria. In the period within which Lisa's later life unfolds, the hysterical symptoms that "distort" actuality are the same forces that produce the white hotel fantasy—Eros and Thanatos.

The race hatred and facism that produce a Babi Yar are the historical counterparts of the life-death instincts that drive the individual person. Divisive, dehumanizing ideology is merely the social mask for the venting of anger that wells up in civil-

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ized populations whose lifestyles repress the power of love and hope within them. Love repressed gives its silent partner, death, its cue to take center-stage. The self that cannot love itself or others must project its anger onto the hated others.

Yet the moral of D. M. Thomas's morality play is not the triumph of death. The Camp is the utopia that is tentatively present beneath the flawed and unreal white hotel. The Freudian case-history of Lisa as "Anna G." is quite appropriately an attempt to find a "cure" within this flawed reality. Given his limitations, Freud could only try to restore Lisa to the very social "normality" that had made her ill in the first place. But, as we have seen, the cure is incomplete. Freud's ingenious reconstruction of the events that made Lisa ill are untruths, unconscious self-deceptions, that conventional analysis cannot penetrate.

The Camp shows us that Lisa is finally cured of her pain when she purges herself by the forgetfulness of self in the necessity to work to help others in need. The solution to the problem of evil, to put it in classical terms, is not a matter of recovering the past, but of transcending time by embracing an ahistorical solution. The last few pages of The Camp reinforce this solution by the allusive hints that crowd into every paragraph. The Camp is the Promised Land of Moses. It is the "happy future" of Zion in Isaiah 35. It is the new Jerusalem of William Blake. It is the Good News of the Gospel. It has in it something resembling Dante's places of purgation and punishment. It even recalls (in the sharing of milk) John Steinbeck's Rosasharn nourishing the old man in the boxcar as she mourns the death of her own child.

The Camp is an eclectic utopia. It makes manifest the messages carried by all the alluded-to utopias. That moral is, quite simply: To learn to love and work, unselfishly, is to be cured in body and mind. Moreover,

> *Mock on, Mock on Voltaire, Rousseau:*
> *Mock on, Mock on: 'tis all in vain!*
> *You throw the sand against the wind,*
> *And the wind blows it back again.*
>
> *And every sand becomes a Gem*
> *Reflected in the beams divine;*
> *Blown back they blind the mocking Eye,*
> *But still in Israel's paths they shine.*
>
> *The Atoms of Democritus*
> *And Newton's Particles of light*
> *Are sands upon the Red sea shore,*
> *Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.*
>
> —*William Blake*

the historical victory of death over life is an illusion. The victory of death is the beginning of salvation.

The Camp sings lustily, in unison with William Blake, "Mock on, Mock on Voltaire, Rousseau." Lisa's young lieutenant is even made to quote a line from the same fragment, "Where Israel's tents do shine by night." Could it be clearer that *The White Hotel* is a paean against scientific reductionism and a celebration of the Blakean vision of the Promised Land? And what about the Freudianism of *The White Hotel?* Clearly D. M. Thomas venerates Freud at the same time that he venerates Blake. When Freud is his grim scientific self, his insight is obscured by "Newton's particles of light" and "the atoms of Democritus." When Freud is himself a prophet, he transcends his own Freudianism. Freud, in an unguarded moment, is known to have claimed that the meaning of happiness is simply to "love and work." Truly, according to Thomas's vision, all will be saved and all will be reconciled—even those who try to reject reconciliation on principle.

* * *

The White Hotel has mostly been praised by its reviewers. The public startled this reviewer by making *The White Hotel* a best-seller. I have seen it listed as a Book-of-the-Month selection, no less. Some of the praise is well off the mark. For example, one reviewer sees Thomas's work as "tragic" and "obviously Sophoclean." The view of life implied by Greek tragedy, on the contrary, runs completely counter to the utopian vision of *The White Hotel.* Rather, the novel affirms wisdom at once more ancient (Judeo-Christian) and more modern (radical Freudian revisionism). The moral is by no means that excessive pride wins its deserved punishment for challenging divine prerogative. Thomas's moral is that repression of Eros makes its own Hell on earth, while its free expression transforms this vale of tears into Paradise. There is one final Freudian transcendence that must be underscored. In Freud's oedipal analysis, it was the rivalry of the sons in pursuit of the father's females that became the mainspring of sociality. For Thomas, the mainspring really is—or could be—unselfish Mother Love, all but ignored by Freud. *The White Hotel* ends, not only with apocalypse, but with a glorification of the Feminine Principle. —*Thomas H. Thompson*

"Missionary Zeal": New Rivers Press

An orchestra is a business. So is a theatre company, an art gallery, a museum, a dance troupe. Though we consumers of the arts don't often think about it when we attend a performance or visit a show, it remains true that none of these organizations would exist without a stable financial base.

A small press is also a business. People start presses from fairly manic love of the written word, but within a year they're looking at numbers—most of them depressingly red. Ideally a small press would earn enough to publish books and pay its president and associates a living wage. In reality most publishers read manuscripts, decide on typestyle and design (sometimes they set type themselves), and peddle the press at book conventions and shows without significant financial remuneration.

The sixties were a time of blooming social programs, and this extended to the arts. In the 'seventies, feminism was off on the Second Wave and everybody was learning to write grant proposals. Now we have Ronald Reagan and David Stockman; supply-side economics means, practically speaking, scant money for the arts. For people weaned on grant monies, this is not an ideal climate for calm endeavor.

It's hardly news that major publishing houses are mostly absorbed now by conglomerates, and that their decisions for publication are capitalist: economic. The place for serious writing to be published has been, and is increasingly, literary

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magazines and small presses. Some writers—like George Garrett recently—say it's the only place left. This is also the place for serious writing to be read, if people will only buy. Small press publishers are often writers themselves. They feel the financial squeeze. They become paranoid. They fold up or get tough.

Getting tough means, in the case of C.W. Truesdale, president and publisher of New Rivers Press, a flurry of letters in response to a negative review in the Minneapolis *Tribune*. It means going to court (in 1980) to protest an IRS denial of tax-exempt status as a nonprofit organization. It means a letter to Washington to protest Reaganomics and pending cutbacks; to the Minnesota State Arts Board for exclusion from funding of "New Rivers and virtually all other literary publishing operations." And, all along, it has meant publishing up to thirteen books a year at no substantial profit: because he believes in his vision of good literature, because he has a sense of mission about the future of writing in this country, and because he wants zealously to have a hand in it.

"Really important literature," says Truesdale in his statement attached to the IRS protest, "often is not recognized for many years. If it is not somehow put into print, in book form, regardless of sales potential, it may well never be published at all and simply disappear from the face of the earth, as do paintings, for instance, which do not find their way into museums."

He adds that he has "never profited personally from 12 years of operation and never intended to, since [my] interest is in establishing and preserving literary value." Over the years, he says, he has consistently supported himself in other ways, "mostly teaching." Teaching is the common denominator for most people associated with New Rivers.

Truesdale founded New Rivers in Nyack, N.Y., in 1968. He got the idea for the Press after books of his own poems were rejected by major houses. "I had received many letters, even from senior editors at some of these houses, saying that although they deeply admired my work, their hands were tied and there was nothing they could do, since poetry and even short fiction were bound in the nature of things to be commercial losers. . . ." But he did not mean to publish his own poems. He had what he calls "a strong, you might say, a 'missionary zeal' towards poetry and good literature in general." From the beginning, he says, "I was committed to the discovery, publication, and promotion of new writing, wherever I found it and however it came in to me." The writing came in quickly. By the third year, he was receiving between two and four hundred unsolicited manuscripts per annum, and this rate has continued.

In 1968 there was no grant support, and Truesdale could only afford to put out three or four books a year. At first, he did everything. He had access to an old Chandler & Price letterpress which he used for the first three books. He was ignorant about printing, and he calls these early products "execrable." But the experience gave him a taste for printing and an admiration for fine work.

And it made him practical. He decided to "publish a lot of good books that were as attractive and professional as they could be, consistent with a very limited budget." He went offset. He bought good but not elegant stock. He began to use practical design that was adapted to the demands of the industry—with cost-efficient page size and binding. Now, he says, "normally I use the 6 × 9 size, since for most of the material I publish it produces a generous, uncrowded look, well adapted to the 12-point typefaces I prefer."

In 1974, New Rivers began to attract grant funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, and later from the New York State Council on the Arts. Truesdale was able to publish at least ten books a year; the average is now around twelve.

He and his Press moved to 1602 Selby Avenue, St. Paul, Minnesota, in late 1978, and 1979 was their first full year as a Minnesota publisher. In spring of 1980, he initiated the Minnesota Voices Project, "a book-publishing program designed to encourage emerging writers of poetry and short fiction in Minnesota and the surrounding area, specifically that kind of writing which the commercial houses tend to ignore."

* * *

New Rivers usually prints 750 copies of its books. Some press runs go as high as 1500. The press does not pay royalties, but it permits retention of copyright by the author and gives the author up to 100 free copies of the work. The books sell usually for an inexpensive $2 to $4. One sample book, *Wilderness* (by Peter Wild with drawings by Hannah Hinchman), was printed in a run of 750 and published in January, 1980, at a production cost of $1,394.04. The list price is $3. Its history is instructive in regard to how a small press makes (or doesn't make) its money.

One hundred free copies of *Wilderness* went to the author, and 25 to the artist; 73 free copies went to reviewers, private individuals, and institutions; 198 copies were sent out—leaving a balance of 552 copies for distribution. As of June 1, 1980, fewer than 200 books were sold, and the book registered a total deficit of $566.04—five months after publication. These figures are cited by Truesdale in his IRS protest. He says they're typical.

In the same statement, he says that "New Rivers Press, Inc., is not a commercial organization and its operations do not resemble those of a commercial publishing house," which should be evident to any reader who has digested the cost breakdown. (The application for tax-exempt status was granted.)

In addition to public funding from governmental sources, Truesdale has found special project funding—from local foundations and grantors—for his Minnesota Voices Project. He has arranged guaranteed purchase agreements for projects in translation. (One such arrangement was made with the American Council of Polish Cultural Clubs to underwrite Victor Contoski's anthology of Polish-American poetry, *Blood of Their Blood.*) He has worked to build subscriptions, particularly with regional libraries, for the Minnesota Voices Project.

It's possible to look at the balance sheets for a small press like New Rivers and—as in a presidential speech—exhaust the audience with figures. But the point needs to be made that for a small press to stay alive money must be found, particularly when that press decides not to make a profit, but only to make books available to a (predictably) small readership.

In reading over the financial statements, the histories, the fliers, the correspondence from New Rivers Press, one finds a high level of anger and an almost Calvinist sense of mission. The anger is leveled at the critics, the fund-withholders, the

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skeptics, the system that shuts out an operation that is so financially tiny it could ride on one wingtip of a B-1 bomber. On a square foot of a wingtip. The mission rests in the books, which keep coming out every year.

Decision for publication has always been made by Truesdale himself. Because of the quantity of unsolicited material New Rivers receives, in 1975 Truesdale set "arbitrary and specific reading periods every year that lasted from a month to six weeks. Anything submitted to me outside the limits of this period," he says, "I simply returned, unread, with a note." Since the reading periods are "always dependent on the grant situation at the moment," it's difficult to announce them in advance. Although Truesdale might miss some good manuscripts using this system, he asserts that "there are always a great plenty to draw on, more than I can possibly use."

Solid financial underpinning could make for better structure, regular reading times, regular deadlines, and confidence about publication. New Rivers publishes anyway.

* * *

I've seen sixteen New Rivers books, and proofs of the four that were published November 1, 1981, as winners in the Minnesota Voices Project. All these books but one are collections of poetry.

The first strength of New Rivers Press is its durability and vitality. Since he began this work, Truesdale has never ceased publishing. Unsold books are warehoused and kept available through distributors like Bookslinger (in Minnesota) and Small Press Distribution, Inc. (in California). A writer who comes out with New Rivers is available in print for years.

All the books are so modestly priced it's amazing they aren't completely sold out. *Running,* by Nathan Whiting, published in 1975, sells for $2.50 paper and $6.00 cloth. Three 1981 collections of poems sell for $3.00 each.

All the books give good space to the poems, are readable, professional in appearance, and mostly handsome in design (an exception might be Vern Rutsala's *Laments,* which has attractive etchings by James Burgess but lacks endpapers and feels cramped). Most of the books are illustrated with drawings, photographs, or etchings, which usually complement the writing.

Some effective illustrations are those by Neil Greenberg, in Albert Goldbarth's 1973 *Coprolites,* and the translucent photographs in *Cup of Cold Water* done by the poet-author Siv Cedering, and the drawings in the style of Peter Max that poet Nathan Whiting made to illustrate his *Running.* Particularly unfortunate are the stilted drawings in Elizabeth Zelvin's *I Am The Daughter* (1981): nymphlike women emerge from lilies of the valley, two women with fixed expressions nestle in the ovary of a flower. And the cover of *Wax Lips* (1980), poems by Kathryn Nocerino, with its hand holding a pair (a set?) of wax lips and its horror-film lettering, is so unappealing that in itself it argues against purchase.

Other books are more attractive. Among them: *Modern Catalan Poetry: An Anthology,* by David H. Rosenthal; *Primele Poeme/First Poems,* by Tristan Tzara; and *Household Wounds,* by Deborah Keenan. These are restrained in color (tan, melon, maroon)

and the latter two have a photograph of the writer—in both cases a helpful addition, since both poets (for very different reasons) are not widely known, and the books are in a sense an introduction to their work. The Tzara book is a fine contribution: it presents the early work of this Dadaist poet; the Keenan is a strong debut for a young Minnesota poet whose poems have appeared in places like *East River Review, Great River Review, Greensboro Review,* and *Poetry Northwest.*

Not many of the books carry a biographical note about the author. This seems to be a serious omission for a press that publishes so much new work.

Writing this year in *NewsArt,* critic Joseph Lazarus says, "New Rivers, guided by its mentor C.W. Truesdale, seems an eclectic amalgam . . . if not a mish-mash. It is, but with taste—with a zest for the differing and, sometimes, the strikingly different. Most of all, both energy and enthusiasm show, over the last two years, in all its varied publications."

In his informal history of the Press, Truesdale wrote, "I have the reputation for being an eclectic editor, a reputation I prize highly, since I am not interested in promoting the work of one school or other of poetry or fiction but only in the highest quality of writing wherever it comes from. Here or abroad."

In short, Truesdale has not played it safe. And he has run the risks that are contingent on being eclectic. Namely, that the Press—like its policies in decision for publication—can become something of a hit-or-miss operation. This is true in book design, and true as well in book content. On the positive side, Truesdale does not stick to "name" writers. The Press has brought out poets as diverse as Victor Contoski, Siv Cedering, Charles Simic, Albert Goldbarth, Thomas Frosch, Deborah Keenan, and Madelon Sprengnether Gohlke.

Risks have kept New Rivers alive, and have brought it both positive and negative critical notice. They are, apparently, meat and potatoes to Truesdale, who uses the word "relish" in referring to them. It must be added that major publishing houses don't commonly take such chances, and surely literature is the loser.

* * *

The first two Minnesota Voices Project books were John Minczeski's *The Reconstruction of Light* and Deborah Keenan's *Household Wounds.*

Local writers and friends of the arts have welcomed the Project. Carol Bly wrote, "Now I have had a chance to read John Minczeski's and Deborah Keenan's books and I love them. I found so many moving, wonderful poems. I *was* a *theoretical* supporter of Minnesota Voices, now I am a practical poem-by-poem supporter." Alvin Greenberg says ". . . the Minnesota Voices Project is publishing regional literature in the best sense of that term—literature that partakes imaginatively *of* place without being limited *by* place, literature that comes strongly *from* somewhere but speaks *to* almost everywhere."

The first of the four MVP books for 1981 is *The Heron Dancer,* by John Solensten, a collection of short stories illustrated with drawings by Jean Allan-Ales.

Many of these stories take place

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in Finnmark, a fictitious Minnesota town. They feature local people—ministers, dentists, horse farmers, hunters, game cleaners. The characters have tangy, regional names like Kristen Hage Ruud, Ed Sotala, Paul Garborg, and Pastor Reuben Onstad.

"The Popcorn Man" begins with setting:

> Take the bone-deep weariness of an August Saturday evening in a small Minnesota town in the North. Take a blue purple sky early before the street lights on the green, fluted posts come on and the people—not the country club people—come in for groceries and talk and other things. Just then, at the bottom of the day, it's a bad time in some ways.

This is what Solensten does best; his stories are pungent with atmosphere. But the popcorn man's outrageous calliope wagon spits oil on him, and he runs down the street in flames. Children see him running and burning, and they laugh, and then they're afraid. We are to understand that an impractical dream can be burned up?

In "The Twister," a farmer rescues an adulterous couple (minister and woman from the congregation) from a rented lakeside cabin just before a tornado hits, and finds himself attracted to the woman. We are to understand that lives can become as twisted as a tornado?

These are ideas, and not stories; and this is the problem with the book.

Stylistically, Solensten likes to put imagistic language into the mouths of common people, but it doesn't quite come off. The old man in "The Heron Dancer" looks at the bird and says, "The sky is in your plumes, and the God sky is in your eyes and beak." After I read the story I went down to the river and looked at a heron and tried to say it. I couldn't. The heron was nonplussed. I kept thinking of Charlton Heston, bringing the tablets down from the mountain.

On the other hand, Solensten has perfect pitch in the bar scene dialogue in "Meet Me at Minnehaha Falls." A woman—marvelously realized character—says she can be noisy at times, though she's quiet just now. "Well, I scream a lot bowling," she says. He says:

> "Don't you want to go somewhere else—nicer?"
> "I don't know. You're not a psycho or something are you?"

Later, when they're grappling in a car in the parking lot, she says,

> "I mean we could be decent to each other."
> "Like how?"
> "You could meet me at Minnehaha Falls and we could start over."

He doesn't meet her, of course.

These stories are strong in characterization and evocation of place; they are insecure in plot. Even with their firm locations, the stories often fail because they ramble; thematically they become sidetracked, and sometimes they opt for easy solutions. At its best, Solensten's prose leans toward magic. A story like "Feathers" makes you want to read more; but "The Birdman of the BEI Tower: A Mad Allegory of Our Time" makes one wish the book had been trimmed. Also, some stories seem out of sequence. A dentist is alive in one story and dead in the next, but alive in the one that follows. This seems to be editorial inattention.

* * *

The Normal Heart (MVP # 4) is written by Madelon Sprengnether Gohlke, with drawings by C. D. O'Hare.

Most of these intelligent, angry poems have to do with occasions—a car accident, a visit to a gallery, a newspaper article—and with women's lives, with aborted human connections, and the gifts offered by the natural world.

"It's Cool Outside and Bright," the story of a seduction, shows the unevenness in Gohlke's work. In the middle of the poem, the seduced girl speaks:

> You are the first. I'm the king's daughter.
> Do something for me. I will make you rich.
> He sweats like a bull, but I'm too simple
> too American. I wear myself
> like a wrap-around skirt.

And the poem ends:

> I don't belong in this country of eagles and snakes
> where the sun comes crashing down like an axe
> and the sea vomits.

Phrases like "sweats like a bull; crashing down like an axe" are not fresh. The vomiting sea is excessive. "The king's daughter" does not strike one as "simple." But I like the assertion in "Do something for me," and regret that Gohlke hasn't provided a better context for it; the wrap-around skirt simile is very nice.

To You Sigmund Freud," is one of the best poems; craft seems less conscious, and the lines are not labored. The poem ends this way:

> If it works it is because
> we submit ourselves without wishing
> without crossing our fingers
> or making signs to it
> as my daughter watches
> a man eviscerate a baby trout
> its small heart as desperate as her own thoughts.
> Because in her mind
> it is always taking place
> just as it was
> the slippery things inside the fish
> turning into trash
> the jumping heart inert,
> its rapid and surprising blood
> turning her green life red.

Some poems here (like "The Dream of Comfort") have something important to say. Others (like "In The Country") transcend their occasion. Gohlke has an insistent poetic voice, but it's too often thought rather than felt, and she inclines to summary endings. There is not enough memorable poetry here to carry the book.

* * *

Ruth Roston's poems, *I Live In The Watchmakers' Town* (MVP # 5) are illustrated with drawings by Barbara Esbensen. The poems have appeared in a number of quarterly magazines, and have been anthologized.

Roston's frequent theme is children—sometimes the children she works with in Poetry in the Schools, and sometimes her own remembered childhood. She writes about them with generosity and empathy. At the end of one poem she says, aptly, "I hear the child's/clear voice," and occasionally the child's clear voice speaks in the poems themselves, as in "Poetry In The Schools: Winter":

> Sometimes I feel
> like I am sailing
> away from my parents
> sailing on the lake of nowhere
> sometimes I feel
> like I am nobody
> in a boat
> alone
>
> words cling
> to Michelle's red boat
> like shipwrecked children

In "Voyage of *The River Belle,*" a retarded boy sings:

> Billy's mouth opens.
> Sounds rise above the music.

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(Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)

1. Title of publication: The North American Review

1a. Publication No. 0029-2397

2. Date of filing: September 25, 1981

3. Frequency of issue: Quarterly (March, June, September, December)

3a. No. of issues published annually: 4

3b. Annual subscription price: $8.00

4. Complete mailing address of known office of publication: 1222 West 27th Street, Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614

5. Complete mailing address of headquarters or general business offices of the publishers: 1222 West 27th St., Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614

6. Full names and complete mailing addresses of publisher, editor, and managing editor:

Publisher: University of Northern Iowa
1222 West 27th St., Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614

Editor: Robley Wilson, Jr.
1222 West 27th St., Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614

Managing editor: None

7. Owner: University of Northern Iowa
1222 West 27th St., Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614

8. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities: None

9. The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for Federal income tax purposes have not changed during the preceding 12 months.

10. Extent and nature of circulation

	Average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 mo.	Single issue nearest to filing date
A. Total no. copies printed (Net press run)	5299	5900
B. Paid circulation		
1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales	1503	1982
2. Mail subscriptions	2043	2102
C. Total paid circulation	3546	4084
D. Free distribution by mail, carrier or other means, samples, complimentary, and other free copies	208	573
E. Total distribution (sum of C and D)	3754	4657
F. Copies not distributed		
1. Office use, left-over, unaccounted, spoiled after printing	48	225
2. Returns from news agents	1497	1018
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No song, too many keys are broken.
He does not hear the harshness
leave his throat.
He has entered the world
where all lost children touch doors,
and locks spring open.

In "Folktale" Roston becomes the child:

I am the dark child
sailing the white pergola
across deep lawns,
searching for home.

If Roston has a talent for catching the harsh, accurate notes in the lives of children, she is able equally to write about things observed. Her haunting poem about Magritte becomes its own raison d'etre:

TWO WINDOWS BY MAGRITTE

i

We see only his back.
A man not young, not old
stands looking out.

An apple larger than a mountain
floats above his head, green
and perfect loneliness.

ii

No one is at the window now.
Just long loaves of bread
the sky has dreamed.

God knows how many
lonely men the loaves
have eaten.

Some poems here ("Spinoff," "Photographer") add nothing to the book. But there are many satisfactions in Roston's work, perhaps first among them the sense of a writer who recognizes her subject and whose voice is neither strident nor artificial, but interested and sure of its pitch.

* * *

Changing the Past (MVP #6), by Laurie Taylor, is a collection of poems illustrated with drawings by Randall Scholes.

This book might well have been called *In Camera* (the title of one of its three sections), so much are its subjects seen with a detached eye, with careful regard. One very good poem might have been written by Taylor about her work itself:

OF THE ORDER *NEUROPTERA*

A lacewing has taken refuge
from the cold, up there,
at the corner of ceiling and wall
where the furnace-air lodges.
A lacewing, for all its bright eyes,
is useless (the garden book says)
but its larvae eat aphids,
and cleverly creep about
with old skins and excrement
piled on their backs, a means
of concealment. Think of poems
trying to survive long enough
to fly, and wonder what the words
are hiding.

The words in Taylor's poems seem to be hiding a meditative silence, a loneliness, and energy as invisible and potent as the wind that turns up in many of them. Taylor's is a world detailed and observed.

The poem "*In Camera*" begins, "I carried my three lenses / into this wind. . ." and goes on

As I rest, nimble sparrows
angle in squadrons for the seedheads
bowing beside the stone wall. The
sky's twinkle
through wind-brushed leaves, the
bubble
of the sun along clear water,
the graceful bend of foxtail,
lie fixed in the instants of my
camera's eye,
and thereby are lost—

or only altered: any new mind
supplying
loft to the suspended wing, swirl
to the moired surface of the stream.

The resonant compression of language is characteristic of the best poems hers. And so is verbal elegance, as these samples show:

The road's wider, striped;
but the same trees still escort
the curves, the old reflectors
fisted in bark.
("Almost Home Again")

In this neutral light
we find the delusion of clarity
of old lithographs.
The houses all seem bluff
and upright, the scarves bright,
although the spruces
are pleated by snow.
("A Matter of Perspective")

The poet runs into trouble when she abandons metaphor and becomes expository. The poems that work best, having to do with photographs, flowers, insects, drawings, show rather than instruct.

Taylor's poems have appeared in many quarterlies, like *Descant*, *North Country*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. Even with its missteps, her book is worth the price of admission.

—*Mary Peterson*

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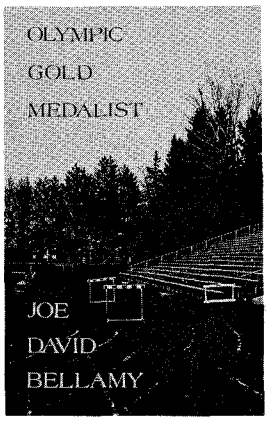

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